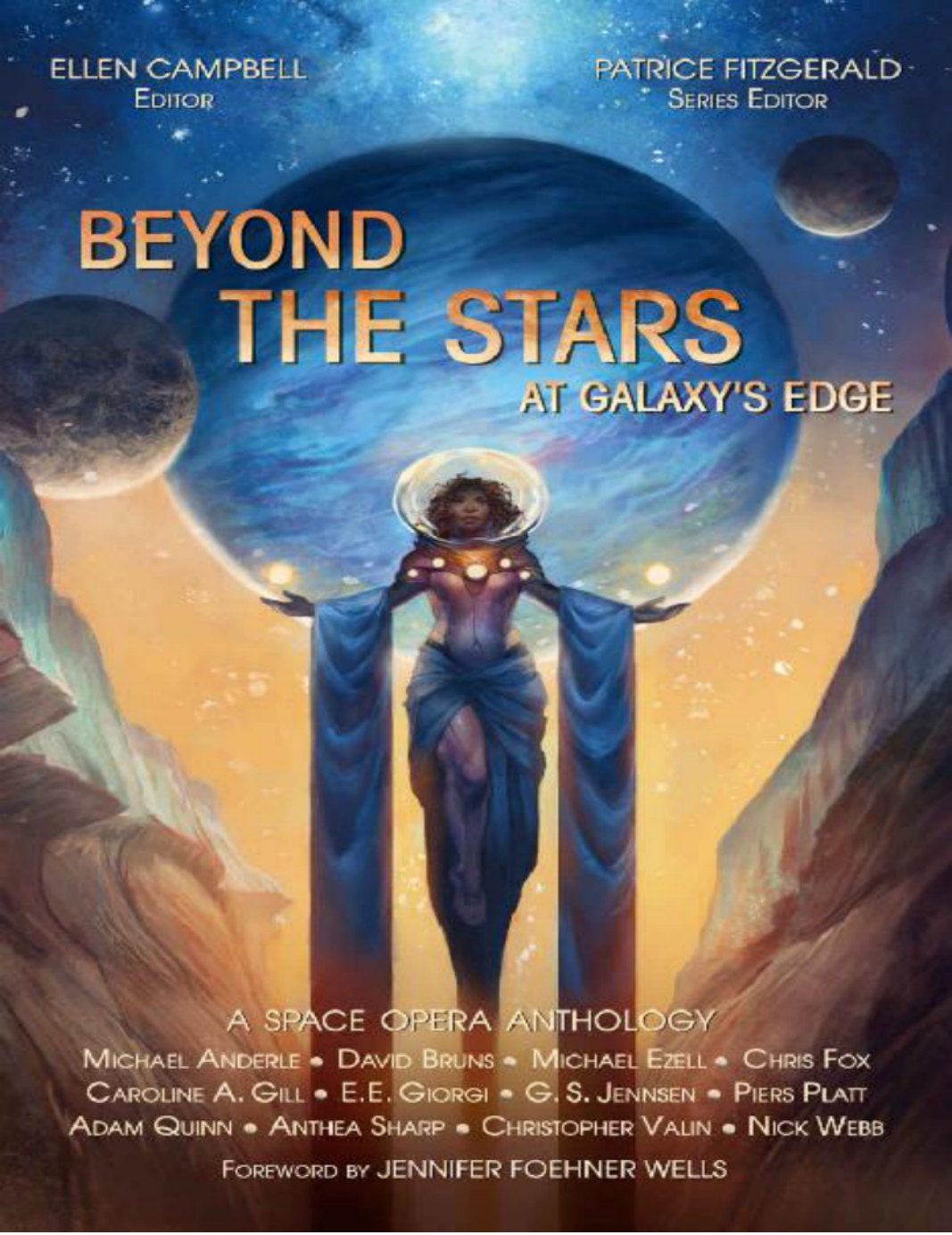
ELLEN CAMPBELL
Editor

PATRICE FITZGERALD
Series Editor

BEYOND THE STARS

AT GALAXY'S EDGE



A SPACE OPERA ANTHOLOGY

MICHAEL ANDERLE • DAVID BRUNS • MICHAEL EZELL • CHRIS FOX
CAROLINE A. GILL • E.E. GIORGI • G. S. JENNSEN • PIERS PLATT
ADAM QUINN • ANTHEA SHARP • CHRISTOPHER VALIN • NICK WEBB

FOREWORD BY JENNIFER FOEHNER WELLS

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

“I really don’t know why I’m surprised anymore to find that the quality of every story is so good!”

A dozen science fiction writers, including New York Times and USA Today bestselling authors, offer remarkable tales in this third collection of space opera stories presented under the Beyond the Stars banner.

These twelve stories showcase strange new worlds, alien life forms, and deep space battles.

Come with us to where the legends are born… at galaxy’s edge.

- Beyond the Stars
  -
  - What people are saying about the Beyond the Stars series:
  - The stories herein...
  - Foreword
    -
    - About Jen
  - The Good Food
    -
    - Q&A with Michael Ezell
  - The Epsilon Directive
    -
    - Q&A with David Bruns
  - Just an Old-Fashioned Lust Story
    -
    - Q&A with Christopher J. Valin
  - The Quarium Wars
    -
    - Q&A with E.E. Giorgi
  - Re/Genesis
    -
    - Q&A with G. S. Jennsen
  - Second Place
    -
    - Q&A with Nick Webb
  - Last Pursuit
    -
    - Q&A with Piers Platt
  - Relic Hunter
    -
    - Q&A with Chris Fox

- Procurement
  -
  - Q&A with Adam Quinn
- One More Star, Shining
  -
  - Q&A with Anthea Sharp
- Tabitha’s Vacation
  -
  - CHAPTER ONE
  - CHAPTER TWO
  - CHAPTER THREE
  - Q&A with Michael Anderle
- Elvis Has Left the Building
  -
  - Q&A with Caroline A. Gill
-
- Beyond the Stars
- Acknowledgments
- Ellen Campbell
- Copyright

Beyond the Stars
At Galaxy's Edge

a space opera anthology

What people are saying about the *Beyond the Stars* series:

Great stories, great writers and a blisteringly good collection.

I really don't know why I'm surprised anymore to find that the quality of every story is so good!

Every one of these stories is excellent. All of them stretch your mind into thinking new thoughts and seeing old thoughts in new ways.

I enjoyed every story in this collection... in fact, I loved most of them... and I'm excited to see more by these authors.

Great book that entertained and left me thinking. Thanks for the chance to discover these new worlds!

The stories herein…

The Good Food (Michael Ezell)

In a far corner of the galaxy, uninhabited Seed World Four-Seven-Alpha experiences a loss of plant life that can't be explained by satellite imagery.

When a deep space Marine Scout and his modified K9 are ordered to investigate, they discover something that makes them redefine the term "uninhabited."

The Epsilon Directive (David Bruns)

In the aftermath of the war, Eraser Squads were formed for one reason: to rid the universe of every last Scythian. When Tom, a reluctant Marine, tracks down a lone Scythian being harbored by a group of human conscientious objectors, his own conscience gets the better of him.

Just an Old-Fashioned Lust Story (Christopher J. Valin)

When the galaxy's greatest bounty hunter decides to help his target spend her husband's money instead of doing his job, his employer sends the next five best scumbags after them both. As one would imagine, bloodshed ensues.

Can even the best of the best survive against such odds and still protect the woman he lo—uh, lusts after?

The Quarium Wars (E.E. Giorgi)

A deadly attack by the hands of General Zika leaves an entire planet dead and an open quest for Quarium—the most sought-after molecule in the Old System. As Hyleesh walks the shores of the destroyed planet searching for answers, he finds the most unlikely of survivors.

Re/Genesis (G. S. Jennsen)

In a future too distant to measure, a hyper-evolved breed of humans calling themselves Anadens rule multiple galaxies and alien species with an iron fist. But a small group of dissidents are willing to pursue any and all measures, no matter how extreme, to return freedom to the universe. Now one rebel Anaden will make the ultimate sacrifice in order to break the reigning Directorate's stranglehold on civilization—however many times it takes.

Second Place (Nick Webb)

The second man to step foot on Mars now wants to go back. And be the first man to die on Mars.

But dying isn't always easy.

Last Pursuit (Piers Platt)

Just one final target stands between a weary assassin and a life of freedom and wealth. But time is running short: the mark knows that he's coming, and he's not the only contractor on the job...

Relic Hunter (Chris Fox)

Wesley Voncamp the 16th is the best relic hunter in the galaxy. Well maybe not the best. Or the 100th best. But he's a relic hunter, after a legendary prize. All he needs is a crew, a ship, and his allergy medicine.

Procurement (Adam Quinn)

Captain Jareyn Brook's Interstellar Emergency Service operates far from the red tape of the capital world of Meltia—and that's exactly how she likes it. But when her ship is destroyed and a government subcommittee threatens to shut the IES down entirely, Brook will have to brave the depths of the Meltian bureaucracy to save her command from legal destruction.

One More Star, Shining (Anthea Sharp)

After escaping Earth, and the rigid expectations of Society, Liza Roth makes a new life for herself as an asteroid miner on the outer

edges of the galaxy. It's a grim and dusty living, and she never expects to fall in love, let alone dream of a better life ahead. But when tragedy strikes, Liza must decide whether to bury herself in the ashes of the past, or find the strength to move forward and light her own way into the future.

Tabitha's Vacation (Michael Anderle)

Tabitha, a Queen's Ranger and follower from before the Queen left Earth to take the fight to the Kurtherians, is sick.

She's sick of being bored.

It has taken Tabitha and her team thirty years to get her assigned system to be good—mostly—with the idea of law and order. Her boss understands that she needs a vacation. One that doesn't involve just lying around on the beach and sipping fruity drinks. And he knows the right place to send her...

Bectal's World, your typical planet of scum and villainy.

Elvis Has Left the Building (Caroline A. Gill)

Humans need machines to fly beyond the limits of our galaxy, to explore the stars.

That's the Rora's assignment: colonize the next Entertainment planet. One old AI and a crew of five humans serving five-year terms as captain aboard a cargo spaceship that's more junker than transport. Together, human and machine fly straight and true for their distant goal.

Until space sickness changes their schedule.

Until madness consumes the ship.

Foreword
by *Jennifer Foehner Wells*

I SPEND A lot of time contemplating what kind of future I want to portray in my stories. Will it be the nearly utopian kind of future depicted in the Star Trek franchise where the antagonists are primarily non-human? Or will it be dark and gritty like Battlestar Galactica where every character is their own worst enemy? The Star Trek approach gives us hope for a better future for all, but is it realistic? Galactica, on the other hand, paints humanity with the darkest brush, rarely giving us even a glimpse of joy.

Humans will always have their foibles. They will be misled, misinformed, act rashly, especially when afraid. The human gestalt will always be complex and fallible, no matter how good and true our intentions may be. Bringing these failings to life through story in a way that may help us learn to do better is the author's job.

Of course I want to imagine a future with total social equity, where we have relieved all of society's ills, but I've often wondered if that is plausible. Like the brave little Dutch boy, we plug the hole in the infernal dike with our fingers, but just as we congratulate ourselves for a job well done, another tiny rivulet of water springs to life just out of reach. Or we run out of fingers. Or help takes too long to come. Or the leak isn't noticed until it's too late and has already become a flood. But perhaps it isn't a dike at all. Perhaps it is the hull of a ship, leaking precious air.

Taking what we know about the human condition and transporting that to Mars, or even as far as the stars, doesn't change that. Humanity is still tribal, no matter how fast our jets, ships, and internet connections can take us around this blue globe. And aliens, should we ever have the pleasure to encounter them, will have their own set of problems, which may be unfathomable to us. The clash of these paradigms will raise the stakes, the drama, and the impact of the inevitable disasters. Xenophobia, eternally a significant problem worldwide, may be the only thing that can unite us as a species against an external intelligence, even if that intelligence turns out to be friendly.

In John Scalzi's Hugo-nominated novel *Old Man's War*, men and women of every nationality, sexual orientation, and skin shade work together to protect human colonized worlds from alien species who want to claim those precious worlds for themselves. On the other hand, The Expanse series by James S.A. Corey delivers a future where our entire solar system has been colonized, but humanity fails to unite

against an alien threat, instead using this ancient alien artifact as a weapon to destabilize the delicate balance of power, pitting faction against faction in a deadly, politically charged environment where many humans are used as pawns and ultimately lose their lives. Similarly, Dan Simmons's Hugo Award winner *Hyperion* tells the tale of a future where Earth is already dead and a group of men and women are sent as pilgrims to placate a mysterious creature called the Shrike in order to preserve the hegemony of mankind spread across the galaxy.

Exploring possible futures like these through story, illuminating our humanity in the face of new extraordinary challenges, is the space opera writer's job. Through an author's mind we experience humanity pushed to its limits firsthand, expanding our potential, revealing what is possible. These may be stories of personal triumph, cautionary tales, descriptions of futility in the face of an uncaring universe, and so much more. In them we learn what potential futures may await us.

It is often said that readers lead a thousand lives. By reading science fiction we can lead those lives with challenges we could never face during our brief existence on Earth. In the following pages you will find your chance to live a dozen more lives within tiny little universes that will exist only for you for a very short time. May they open your eyes, your heart, your mind.

Jennifer Foehner Wells

Indiana

July 14, 2016

About Jen

As a child growing up in rural Illinois, Jennifer Foehner Wells had the wild outdoors, a budding imagination, and books for company. Her interest in science fiction was piqued early on when a family friend loaned her a Ray Bradbury compilation, among loads of other wonderful sci-fi books. Jen currently lives an alternately chaotic and fairly bucolic existence in Indiana with two boisterous little boys, two

semi-crazed cats, and a neurotic chihuahua mix. You can find her on Twitter, extolling science and sci-fi fandoms, as @Jenthulhu. To find out more about Jen, visit: www.jenthulhu.com.

The Good Food
by *Michael Ezell*

THE DROP-SHIP'S RETROS kicked in hard, blowing away rich black soil that had crept onto the landing pad over the decades since someone had last been there.

Self-adjusting struts scraped against the ferrocrete surface as the ship's weight settled onto the planet. The specially treated ferrocrete didn't allow plants to grow on the half-mile square, otherwise it would have been taken over long ago. Aggressive green life rose up all around the landing pad. A jungle world, ruled by trees and vines, populated solely by insects. Until today.

Inside the drop-ship, Jensen unbuckled himself from the pilot's couch. He giggled out loud in the empty cabin. Pilot. More like a glorified gardener sent to spread some new shit around the back forty. The computer did all the—

"Touchdown, Jensen. You may move about the cabin now."

"Yeah, thanks, Moira," Jensen said.

The words came out a little garbled. His throat felt like he tried to swallow a jellyfish. Hypersleep phlegm. All this tech and they still couldn't solve that one. The eggheads who sent him assured him it would clear up within thirty-six hours of waking. Going on three days now and he still sounded like a four-pack-a-day smoker.

"What's the distance to the anomaly line?" Jensen said.

"Three-point-seven miles from the center of the pad. It has gotten closer, Jensen."

"Yeah, I know. I read the brief."

"Just making conversation. You don't have to be crabby."

Supposedly, they modeled the ship's AI on Moira Tiernan, the designer of these long-range ships. Jensen always envisioned her as a woman who'd insist on paying her half of the dinner tab and give you a hearty handshake at the end of the date.

"Shall I begin the wake up procedure for Roy?" Moira said.

"Sure. Bet he's gonna pee all over every tree in sight," Jensen said.

"Doubtful. There is no significant buildup of waste during stasis."

"Yeah, yeah! Geez, Moira, it's a figure of speech. Let in some light, will ya?"

Jensen stood and stretched his back as Moira opened the reentry shields over the thick windows. The odd bluish tinge to the sunlight streaming in made the bridge feel like the inside of a fish tank. He'd been told, even shown photos, but still...

Not even Moira interrupted this first silent stare at Seed World Four-Seven-Alpha. A lush primordial jungle, with small insects buzzing, flitting, jumping, carrying on a furious pace of life. Two centuries of terraforming had paid off.

But just a bit over three miles from here, the greenery ended on a neat line that ran arrow-straight for a quarter mile. A mass extinction that photos from Four-Seven-Alpha's lone monitoring satellite couldn't explain.

The *clickety-click* of toenails on the deck announced Roy's arrival. The dog looked like Jensen felt. Groggy, a little off center, and in need of a good stretch.

"Hey, boy!" Jensen put out a hand and Roy trotted over. Big for a Belgian Malinois, Roy's shoulders came up to Jensen's waist. Jensen scrubbed the reddish-blond fur behind the dog's ears and Roy responded with a deep play bow that stretched his back. Vertebrae crackled and Roy shook himself like he'd just come in from a rainstorm.

He nuzzled Jensen's hand, flipped it up with his nose. Jensen laughed and scrubbed between Roy's ears again. "You're gettin' soft, trooper."

Roy trotted over and put his front paws on the window ledge to look out into the jungle. A flexible speaker implanted in the dog's neck turned throaty growls into an approximation of human speech using a few basic words and phrases.

"Go pee."

Jensen cocked an eyebrow at the camera in the cabin ceiling. "Moira? Anything to say about that?"

"The lower hatch is open. Tell that mutt not to urinate on my flanks."

* * *

Cold, crisp, the air tasted oddly like a fruit flavored gum from back home. He'd been more than a little leery of stepping outside without a helmet, but Moira called him a pussy. A pussy! A damn computer shouldn't be able to talk to a decorated veteran like that. Sure, there was enough oxygen to keep him alive here, but what if the plant extinction had something to do with an airborne pathogen?

Moira reminded him that whatever killed off the plants hadn't harmed anything else. The insects were still alive.

So off he went with Roy, but he still wore his combat suit and carried a maglev rifle. Damned if he would let a smartass computer shame him into getting killed. He tried to keep his combat edge, but

the three-mile walk through gorgeous flora eventually had him admiring his surroundings. Sweet smelling tube flowers at least two feet across, their petals every color combination Jensen's brain could process, and some it couldn't, with yellow stamen thicker than his arm. More plants no higher than his ankle with flowers the size of his pinkie nail. He let Roy range ahead and mark his new territory. And the dog had a lot to mark. Trees and vines arched up into a canopy that displayed its own rainbow of fruits above Jensen's head. Which the millions of bugs here put to good use. Making more bugs.

The combat suit generated a mild electromagnetic field that kept the bugs away, but pretty soon Jensen didn't have to worry about it. When he reached the edge of the jungle, he noticed the insects seemed to stay behind an invisible line about three feet back from the last plants.

As seed planet catastrophes go, this one didn't seem too bad. Looked like they just got the mixture of early insects wrong. Sometimes the smart boys back home guessed wrong. The genetic alterations made to plants that grew under this bluish light could very well have made them tasty to an insect that would otherwise ignore them. But what the hell did a grunt know about those things? He was just here to take samples and report back. The clean, straight line of demarcation had Jensen feeling antsy, though. What insect ate everything in a perfect line like that? Space locusts?

The rich soil where the jungle stopped appeared churned up, as if a well-disciplined platoon of wild hogs had come through here. But Seed World Four-Seven-Alpha had no life bigger than a dragonfly before Jensen and Roy arrived. The introduction of larger species had to be carefully controlled over decades to ensure a stable food chain.

Jensen selected a silver tube off his belt and knelt to scoop up a soil sample. He'd let Moira do all the brainwork.

Ping-ping!

The motion alert on his suit made Jensen snap to his feet. A vibration on his upper left chest pointed him toward whatever set off the sensor. Not Roy. Judging from the sound of crashing underbrush and snapping branches, the dog was exploring the jungle about fifty feet to his right.

Gun up, moving heel-to-toe, stable shooting platform.

He scanned for movement over the sights. Insects flitted behind him, but his motion alert was set to Combat Spec. It would only register something larger than two feet in length.

And as far as Jensen knew, the only two things in this star system that met that criterion were Roy and him.

He whispered into his throat mic. "Roy, here."

Within moments, Roy stood at his side, ears up and forward, eyes

locked ahead.

"Attack us?" Roy's neck speaker said.

"No," Jensen said.

"Attack them?"

That had actually been Jensen's first instinct. In his world, when you knew where all the good guys were, you shot at anything else that moved. Especially when you're light years from home and backup.

However, he worked for the Science Wing right now—*Better than being mothballed after the war*—and none of those pinheads had ever seen combat. They just wouldn't understand if he killed some life form out here. Ours or otherwise.

"No. Only look. Go now," Jensen said.

Roy obeyed without hesitation. He slunk off into the brush to the left. Jensen stayed in the green, away from the line of dark soil and rocks three feet to his right. Unsure of exactly which side he should watch, he just stayed put and waited—

Roy's frantic barks set Jensen in motion like a starter's pistol. He hustled through the brush, snapping twigs and crushing plants and flowers. He skidded to a stop next to his dog, finger a millimeter from the trigger.

The hollow boom of Roy's barking had brought all the flitting insects to a halt. The dog stood in the green, but had his eyes locked on the dark soil. Out there. In the dead zone.

"Off!" Jensen yelled.

Roy stopped barking. He circled Jensen, excited and whining. "Move. Something move," Roy said. "Out there."

Ping-ping!

The suit alarm and Roy's renewed barking made Jensen flinch so hard he almost shot off his own foot. Did he really see that? A mound of dirt out there. Had it been there before? He hadn't really paid attention. It looked freshly churned up, but so did all the soil close to the line.

"Off!"

Roy stopped barking again. He came to the heel position without being told.

"Something move. Talk."

"Talk? Talk to you?" Jensen said. That gave him the creepies.

"Yes. Bad feel," Roy rumbled.

The dog trembled against Jensen's leg. Whatever pinged his motion sensor and churned up that dirt had Roy worried. Jensen had seen the dog leap into a gun pit full of Rhotellian Marines with heavy weapons and kill three men with his teeth. Nothing scared that dog.

Except whatever the fuck this was.

"Okay, we're heading back. We have samples for Moira to

analyze, anyway," Jensen said.

The two soldiers backed away together.

* * *

"This soil contains an abundance of a substance very much like mica, with atoms arranged in hexagonal sheets. But... it is not mica."

Moira's clipped voice rang off the stainless walls of the ship's tiny galley.

"Well, what is it, then?" Jensen said.

"I don't know," Moira said.

Blowing on the cup of rancid black coffee did nothing to make it anything less than molten. Jensen dumped reconstituted cream into the tarry black liquid and took a sip.

"Blech. Whaddya mean? You know everything."

"Hardly. I know only what my human programmers have told me," Moira said. For a computer, she put on the human style snark pretty well.

"Yeah? That makes two of us. So what's the big deal? An alien rock is bound to have alien minerals, right?" Jensen said.

He tossed Roy a piece of soy jerky. The dog gave it a half-hearted sniff, but didn't eat it. Since they got back, he'd done nothing but lay there with his head on Jensen's foot.

For a computer, Moira had a wide range of ways to express her exasperation with Jensen. She actually sighed.

"Early samples of soil from Seed Planet Four-Seven-Alpha indicate only trace amounts of this unknown substance, along with low readings of fossilized plant material. That's the main reason we chose Four-Seven-Alpha. If plants grew here before, it stands to reason—"

"Which is all very fascinating. I just want to know what gave me and my dog the creeps out there," Jensen said.

"I have no way of knowing what would cause an irrational psychological response in a human, much less a dog. What I do know for sure is that the soil is now riddled with this material that was once scarce. That, Jensen, would be called an anomaly in any basic high school science course."

The food printer beeped and Jensen eased Roy's head off his foot. He stroked the dog's neck. "Shake it off, big boy. We got 'za on the way!"

He went to the printer and retrieved a pepperoni pizza. A disk of repurposed proteins dripping with orange oil. The first old Italian chef who came up with pizza would have killed himself if he saw this in the future. When Jensen sat down again, Roy put his head right back

on his foot.

"Jensen?" Moira sounded a little put out.

Even Roy looked up when Jensen just kept eating.

"Good food?" Roy growled/said.

Jensen tossed a piece on the floor and Roy snapped it up.

"Are you going to act like a juvenile, or are you going to discuss this with me?" Moira said.

Fake pepperoni grease ran down Jensen's chin. No expense spared for the troops. "Were we discussing? I thought you were just insulting me."

"This is why the real Moira argues against manned missions. You need to keep emotion out of the equation."

"Blah, blah, blah. Lots of mica. What's the deal?" Jensen said.

"As I said, it is not mica. Although it appears crystalline, it has a component I cannot identify. But I am unable to rule out the possibility that it is some type of unknown biological material."

"Like... it's alive?" Jensen stopped eating.

"No. I believe it may be waste, of a sort."

"Waste? As in The Stinky Torpedo? Do I even wanna know what kind of thing would shit mica?"

"Of course you do. And we're going to find out."

* * *

Jensen had tried the old military joke. "Who is 'we'? You got a mouse in your pocket?"

For all her sighs and *tsks*, Moira apparently hadn't been programmed with a human sense of humor.

The giant ferns and squatty fruit trees made him feel like the star of some old holo serial where the heroes traveled back in time. But the wet jungle smell and the trickle of sweat down the middle of his back reminded him of shipping to an uprising back home. Colombia. Nasty, nasty fighting.

Twitchy now. Rifle already up, though he didn't know what he was looking for. The fact that Roy stayed glued to his hip didn't help matters. He didn't have the heart to order the dog out front. The canine's normally perky ears had been laid back against his sleek skull since they left the ship.

"Okay, Roy?"

The speaker vibrated so quietly. "No."

A dragonfly the size of a sparrow swooped across Jensen's vision and one wing struck the bridge of his nose—

The high-pitched whine and sonic cracks from his maglev rifle

filled the air. Plant life around them exploded in green gobs of juice and fiber. Only a split second, but thirty high explosive rounds had sprayed across the landscape.

"Damn it. Teach me to keep my finger away from—"

"Jensen, report." Moira's insistent voice in his earpiece.

"Just trimming the bushes a little. Relax, Moira," Jensen said. Last thing he needed right now was some damn computer—

Roy suddenly began to whine and pace about. He eyed the jungle ahead, near the line of demarcation.

"What?" Jensen said. "Roy, what is it?"

"Bad."

And then the dog was gone, running toward the dead zone.

"No, here! Roy, damn it, heel!"

Jensen ran blindly, following his dog's crushed path through the virgin undergrowth. When he ran out of the jungle and spotted Roy, Jensen almost wished he hadn't found him. Standing with hind feet on the green vegetation, and front feet on the black soil, Roy quivered in place. He stared at the horizon, at nothing at all.

At first, Jensen didn't notice the little brown lump against Roy's foot. Then it grew out of the churned soil and leaned against the dog's foreleg. It looked like an overgrown hedgehog, with sleek brown hair. No, not hair. Shiny stuff, looked hard on the surface.

"Roy, here," Jensen whispered.

Nothing happened.

One foot at a time, Jensen shuffled toward Roy and the little creature. His rifle stayed up, but he didn't really know what he would shoot. If he fired now, he'd take Roy's leg off at the shoulder.

"Roy."

Nothing. The dog just shivered in place and stared at the horizon while that freaky little thing rubbed on his leg.

Jensen reached out to grab Roy's collar. The thing against Roy's leg looked up, revealing a tiny little face amid all the crystalline "hair." Big brown watery eyes, in what looked like a leathery gray face. It didn't seem aggressive at all. In fact, it looked cuter than any kitten Jensen had ever seen.

His left hand hung in space, index finger extended to hook Roy's collar. Those soft round eyes held him entranced...

The creature leaped up and bit off the end of Jensen's finger.

No pain. No sensation at all. Not really teeth, but a beak-like thing behind those gray lips had nipped the end off his left index finger at the first knuckle.

The warm spatter of blood on his boot triggered a deep reflexive breath. Sudden adrenaline hammered Jensen's brain and sparks flew in his vision. "Shit!"

He backpedaled, trying to line up a shot that wouldn't hit Roy. The dog remained still as a statue.

"Roy, here. Damn it, wake—"

Ping-ping! The alarm stopped Jensen cold. From about ten feet out, a ripple began in the soil. The creature that bit him didn't move. It just stared at him with cartoon character eyes as Jensen's blood dripped down its hair/scales.

When the ripple in the dirt got close to it, the creature let out a sharp shriek. It started hopping toward Jensen on stumpy legs that reminded him of an armadillo. Then the dirt wave broke open and dozens of them came at him. Exact copies of the first one, all with cute, disarming eyes and razor sharp beaks.

Survival instinct took over and Jensen hosed the advancing wave with the maglev rifle. He emptied his entire magazine and the jungle filled with supersonic *cracks* and shrieks. When hit by titanium slugs, the creatures burst in a combination of gore and what looked like bits of shale.

When he reached for a new magazine, he saw how stupid he'd been. He should've run.

The first five hit him before he could snap the new mag in place. Bit right through a suit that stopped high-energy weapons, taking shallow scallops of his flesh. He screamed and smashed them with his rifle, squashing three of them before his foot caught on a low bush and he went down.

A wave of them crashed over him.

Shrieking that seemed to come from inside his skull. Biting, biting, a never-ending wave of hungry mouths—

A *roar* like Jensen had never heard. Roy hit him and the creatures at full speed, turning the fight into a whirling ball of blood, shale, fur, and teeth.

The dog snapped and chomped, ripping, crushing, throwing the creatures aside. The disciplined military K9 had disappeared, replaced by a prehistoric wolf-dog, living through its teeth and fury.

Jensen found the strength to push himself to his feet. He froze when he saw the line of creatures. They'd followed him through the brush, so it was hard to count them hidden in the greenery, but there were easily two hundred of them.

Why didn't they just come then?

Roy growled and the closest creatures seemed to fold in on themselves. It reminded Jensen of an old vid he saw of a hedgehog rolling up. In an instant, they were hard little balls of rock.

Figuring he'd worry about the whys later, Jensen backed toward the ship. He slapped a fresh magazine in place.

"Roy, let's go. Back to the ship."

This time, Roy obeyed. He kept his teeth bared at the creatures and backed toward Jensen.

Once Jensen had Roy under the muzzle of his rifle, the jungle filled with a rustling noise. The creatures he could see moved back toward the dirt they'd come from. He didn't exactly know what happened. He'd never had First Contact training. All Jensen knew was that they needed to leave. Now.

* * *

Moira's surgical arms made short work of Jensen's injuries. The missing fingertip had been the worst of it. The rest of the wounds seemed terribly shallow for creatures apparently bent on killing him.

"I am still unable to identify the chemical they left in the bites, but it doesn't seem to be harming you. Perhaps it only serves to deaden the pain so they can continue to feed."

Jensen didn't answer. He just watched her robotic arms work on Roy. Silicone-tipped metal fingers delicately lifted Roy's upper lip and pulled another bit of hard material out. His mouth and upper neck were covered in tiny cuts. What looked like porcupine bristles made of crystalline rock were stuck all over his face and inside his mouth.

Jensen held Roy across his lap while Moira worked. He thought for a while before he answered the computer.

"That's all incredibly interesting information, Moira. But not really. Let's prep the ship to leave."

No answer as Moira dropped one of the spines into an analysis chamber. The chamber's armored door closed, and white light flashed from the seams. Inside, the sample was incinerated and the gases analyzed.

"Interesting," Moira said. "Initial analysis shows this material has what we might call a genetic code that contains something similar to mica and an unidentifiable organic base."

"They're made of minerals?" Jensen said.

"By our definition, perhaps. It is simply a life form we cannot explain. That's the closest my databanks can come to an answer. In truth, it's much more complex. A being that is mostly rock could survive for thousands, perhaps millions of years between meals. Rocks don't need sustenance."

"But the other part of them does. Whatever that is," Jensen said.

"Apparently. I do detect bits of plant life among these samples. As well as bits of you, of course," Moira replied.

"You said there were possibly plants here before. You think they ate them all and then what, hibernated after that?"

“Perhaps. Normally, if a species experienced a population explosion greater than their food source could support, most of them would die off,” Moira said.

“But if they could hibernate, then they could just... wait for more food to show up,” Jensen said.

“You’re not nearly as ignorant as you first appeared.”

Jensen flipped a middle finger at the ceiling camera.

The last of the crystalline things came out of Roy’s mouth and he hopped off Jensen’s lap and shook himself.

“Go sleep,” he growled/said. The dog slumped off toward their quarters. Roy had a kennel, of course, but he always slept in Jensen’s quarters. Jensen didn’t blame him for wanting to sleep. He felt dog-tired, himself.

“Okay, Moira, let’s get the ship ready for launch. I’m actually looking forward to stasis this time.”

“Get some rest, Jensen. Tomorrow we’ll capture one of those creatures and then we can go back.”

“Hey, I said prep the ship for launch. I’m not goin’ out there again. And since you don’t have any legs, or a body for that matter, looks like ‘we’ are out of luck,” Jensen said.

“I shall remind you that you are an employee of the Interstellar Colonization Committee.”

“I’m a soldier.”

“Even more reason for you to follow orders. I quote, ‘If any physical cause of the plant extinction can be found, a sample shall be returned to Earth.’”

“Yeah, we got samples out the ass. Prep us to launch, Moira.”

“Jensen, these are unique life forms—”

“Fine. I’ll do it myself from Override Control.”

Jensen stood to leave and swayed on his feet. “Damn. All that adrenaline has me dizzy.”

“Jensen, you are violating protocol by launching the ship on your own.”

“They can fire me when I get back.”

With one hand on the wall, Jensen headed for the med bay hatch. It got harder to move by the second. A low growl stopped him cold. Roy stood in the hatch, hackles raised and teeth bared.

“Roy, what the hell are you doing? Off.”

The dog advanced on him, walking stiff-legged, eyes rolling, jaws dripping with drool.

“Roy, off!”

No sign of recognition.

“Jensen, he appears to have been affected by—”

“No shit, Moira!”

Jensen backed away until he had a small table between himself and Roy. Feeling more and more dizzy, Jensen leaned on the table. He knew to take the bite on his forearm when Roy made his move, and reach under to choke the dog out. But would he be able to stay upright long enough to do it?

He took a deep breath to try and clear his head. He drew himself up as tall as possible. The Alpha Dog.

"Roy!" Jensen screamed as loud as he could. "Sit! Now!"

Roy just stared at him, but the growling slowly stopped. He didn't budge, much less sit.

"Sit, Roy. Now."

Something seemed to penetrate the brain behind those wild eyes. Roy's flanks crept toward the deck, millimeters at a time. Finally, he sat.

When Jensen made for the hatch, Roy started to get up.

"No." Jensen said. "You stay. Me go."

Finally, Jensen lurched out the door and slapped the control panel. The hatch slid shut, hiding Roy's baleful stare. Jensen thought his balance would get better on his way to the bridge, but it just got worse. He felt feverish and all the bite wounds on his body started to throb.

Once he got to the main controls, he keyed open the manual operation panel and set the launch order. The drop ship had a built in timer that tracked the best launch window to rendezvous with the Skip-Ship in orbit out there. The screen read 7:48:32 and counting. A little less than eight hours and they'd be home free.

Once they launched, everything was automatic. Back up into the belly of the Skip-Ship and into stasis. A few months of sleep until they hit the Skip Gate in this corner of the Universe. Then they'd blip into existence just on the far side of Saturn for the final glide home.

His stomach suddenly hitched and he threw up all over his boots.

"Jensen? Are you feeling ill?" Moira said. Her voice sounded tinny and faraway.

"No shit, Moir—"

The deck swam up to meet him and he fell into the blackest sleep he'd ever known. He dreamt of whispering voices speaking a language he could never hope to understand.

* * *

Seemed hot in his sleeping quarters. And his bed felt rock hard.

With a start, Jensen awoke on the steel deck of the bridge. Sweat soaked the fabric of his jumpsuit and his mouth felt like a dry

riverbed.

"Moira, what happened?" He could hardly force the words out. He stood, keeping one hand on the wall.

"Moira?"

The eerie silence threatened to release a wild panic he could feel building in his belly. Jensen reached for his rifle... Not there. Now how in the hell did that happen?

The emergency weapons locker stood open. Everything gone. That made his heart start to hammer. Black dots swam in his vision and Jensen couldn't tell if it was adrenaline or the poison from the creatures.

Well, maybe not poison. He did wake up. Moira would be proud of him for figuring that out. Whatever it was had kept him down long enough to make him mica-hedgehog food if he'd been in the open. Their little bites weren't intended to kill, apparently. They just put you to sleep so you could be eaten alive.

When he gathered his wits enough to check the control screens, he saw why Moira hadn't answered him. Coolant alarms were blaring red bands across all the screens, but the sound had been muted. Someone—something had screwed with the cooling system that kept Moira's giant computer brain alive.

The 'dumb' backup systems that ran the ship's operations had survived. That was a relief. The countdown to launch read 15:42 and counting.

He'd been out for over seven hours.

Jensen checked all systems and saw that the lower hatch was stuck open. Security cameras showed a rock jammed in the track.

Unarmed, Jensen felt exposed when he got to the hatch. He grabbed a fire extinguisher, a poor weapon really, but the weight of it made him feel better. He was relieved to discover an actual rock jamming the door, not one of the creatures curled up in the track. He didn't need his extinguisher/club.

A quick peek outside—Roy lay there on his side, unconscious. His legs and body twitched like he was having a nightmare.

Figure about fourteen minutes to launch. Enough time to go out there and get Roy. If he wanted to. Jensen wasn't too sure. The creatures had obviously affected Roy. He said they talked to him, which meant they might have found a way to connect with the dog's mind.

In the end, though, Jensen looked out there and saw his partner. The partner who had kept him out of ambushes, saved his life by putting his own body in harm's way, shared body heat with him in that frozen fighting hole during his first combat assignment. Keeping sharp eyes on the jungle, Jensen sprinted out to where Roy lay. When

he reached the dog, Roy immediately opened his eyes.

He'd been had.

The rustle from the jungle made Jensen's body break out in gooseflesh. Hundreds. No, thousands. They lined the launch pad. Most were the size of the ones that attacked him and Roy. Some were bigger, maybe half the size of Roy.

Jensen looked down at his dog. At least his teeth weren't bared. The look in Roy's eyes was unlike anything Jensen had ever seen before. A certain... intelligence.

"Roy. We need to go back to the ship."

"No," Roy growled/said.

"Why not?"

The creatures advanced across the pad and Jensen tried to figure his odds of beating them in a race back to the door. He wouldn't have bet half a credit on himself to win.

"They not hurt you. I say," Roy said.

The creatures parted like a living wave as they reached Roy and Jensen. They went around them and started scampering up the ramp. They were entering the ship.

Jensen stared at Roy.

"Roy. What is this?"

"They say 'Green is food.'"

Roy nodded his head toward the jungle, an almost human gesture.

"Yeah. I see that. They're eating it. So?" Jensen said.

Roy stood and walked toward the ship. He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "But you. *Good* food."

Jensen watched in horror as the little creatures climbed into the ship. They poured over each other like water, cramming through the hatch at a terrifying speed.

"No." Jensen moved toward the ship.

One of the creatures wheeled and let out those little shrieks that reverberated inside Jensen's skull. They advanced on him, their sharp beaks snapping.

Rapid-fire barking brought it all to a stop. Roy stood between Jensen and the creatures. Those closest to him actually balled up into little rocks again.

These creatures still went by the law of the jungle. The animal with the biggest teeth is king. They went back to boarding the drop ship. Roy stood on the ramp and wagged his tail at Jensen.

"Me go. You stay."

Roy turned and went inside. The door slid shut and the ramp retracted. The rumble of prelaunch warm-up snapped Jensen out of his stupor and he ran for the jungle. He dove into the heavy brush just

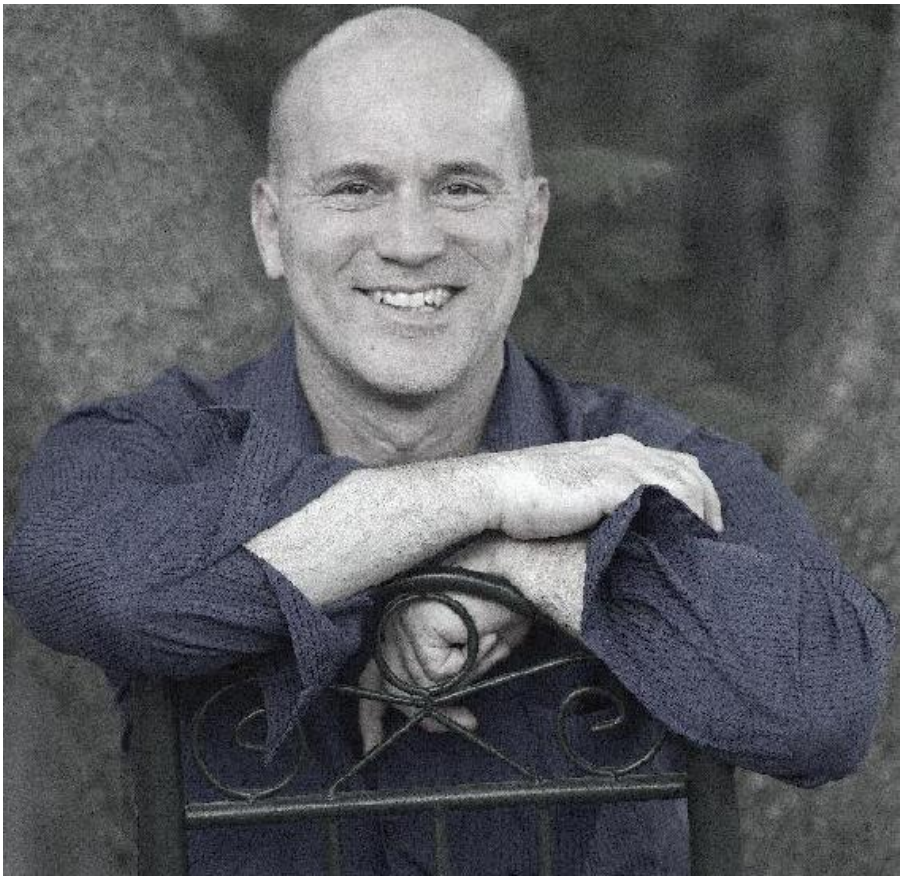
before the bellowing rockets shook this world for the second time.

The entire jungle trembled at the drop-ship's furious power.

A million insects and one lonely primate watched that ship scream into the sky, headed back to Earth.

Where the good food lived.

Q&A with Michael Ezell



Why a K9 team in space?

I was a K9 handler in the United States Marine Corps, and I'd always wanted to write a story about a dog handler. I figured bureaucrats of the future would love the cost-effectiveness of a single Marine with a dog sent to tackle a problem an entire team of scientists *should* be handling.

Where else can we find your work?

"The Sharks of Market Street" - Appeared in *Girl at the End of the World, Vol. 2* - Fox Spirit UK

(I love the girl in this story with all my heart. She's a badass.)

"Bones of a Righteous Man" - *Fantasy for Good* - Nightscape Press

(I was honored to be in the same book as Piers Anthony, a guy I started reading in Junior High! I'm listed in the "Weird Fantasy" section. Don't hold that against me.)

"The Clockwork Hooker and the Mysterious Bearded Girl" - *On*

Spec Magazine Summer 2015 Issue.

(No... Not that kind of hooker. I oughta wash your mind out with soap.)

Please support these and other hardworking publishers who keep short form Sci-Fi and Fantasy alive!

Do you do any other forms of writing?

I've optioned a Sci-Fi screenplay, and won a couple of screenwriting contests. Alas, I still haven't cracked the screenplay market with a sale... yet.

Who are some of your favorite writers?

I love reading stuff that makes me incredibly angry that I didn't write it. Know what I mean?

So in that regard, Stephen King's "The Stand" and William Gibson's "Neuromancer" piss me off quite a bit. Every time I read them. Again.

Do humans write like that? I'm not entirely certain Gibson isn't a Replicant. And King survived being run over by a van, so he's for sure a Terminator.

What's the hardest part of writing for you?

Really, it's not the actual writing. It's the marketing. I suck at it. Big time. My wife says I should have a bigger web presence. I told her that didn't help the spider in the bathroom she made me squash. She was not amused.

I reluctantly started a blog:

www.sinisterwriter.com

The Epsilon Directive
by *David Bruns*

THE PROTESTERS CALLED us ‘genocide squads.’ The military designated us as Epsilon Units. But inside the Corps we called ourselves ‘Erasers.’

Names aside, everyone agreed that we existed for only one purpose: to kill Scythians. Every last one of them.

And we were good at our job.

By the time I was drafted, the war was in the mop-up stages. I’d grown up hearing about the great fleet battles and how my siblings fought with honor. I’ll never really know since none of them came back. Still, war was the family business, a proud tradition of military service that went back generations. The day I turned eighteen, the admiral—my father—made me pancakes for breakfast then took me to the local armory to enlist.

The proudest day of my life—his words, not mine.

I can still recall my feelings as I filled out the draft form. Dread, fear... and ultimately, shame. My finger hovered over the check box labeled CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR, while my father joked with the Marine recruiter about the new uniform regs. I tried to force my finger to touch the screen, but I couldn’t make myself do it. I signed the dotted line and shoved my fists into my pockets instead.

My father wore his uniform that day so he could administer the oath. He shook my hand afterward. “Your brothers would be so proud of what you’re about to do.”

I put my fists back in my pockets and made a noise that I suppose he took as agreement.

That’s the short version of how I came to be riding in the back of *Fury*, a *Revenge*-class assault craft, as a member of Eraser Seven. Normally, a ship of this size would carry six armored and battle-loaded Marines, but it’d been modified for Epsilon sweep missions. We carried three Marines plus a pilot and provisions for two weeks in space.

Our mission was pretty simple—just the way Marines like it. After the fleet battles broke the back of the Scythian forces, the enemy scattered like rats all over the known galaxy. We were there to find the survivors and kill them. Simple.

Our job was made so much easier when the United Earth Federation, following the massacre at Delphi, voted to suspend the Geneva Convention for the balance of the Scythian War.

“Entering orbit around Talos 5,” Mambo called back to me from

the cockpit, not bothering to use the intercom. The pilot's real name was Gwyneth, but she insisted we call her Mambo, even off duty. "Light 'em up, Noogie." It says something about Marines that I'd been a part of this Eraser Squad for a year and they still called me 'noogie,' short for "new guy."

I grumbled to myself as I booted up the Zeron unit. Specially modified to search for Scythian life signs, the Zeron allowed us to scan planets for the enemy from high orbit, giving one Eraser Squad the capability to search an entire solar system in only a few weeks.

The Talos system was well outside settled space, and so far, devoid of any humanoid life forms, including Scythians. Talos 5—this system was so far off the beaten path that no one had even bothered to name the planets—was our last stop before we headed back to the rendezvous point. We'd eaten all the decent freeze-dried meals, and the air had taken on a taint of recycled ozone that clung to the back of my throat.

I connected my sensor package with the ship's nav system. "Commencing scan, Mambo."

She raised her hands from the controls. "She's all yours, Noog." The ship banked gently as it entered a preset search pattern. I settled back in my seat and crossed my arms. For a planet this size, a full scan took about eighteen hours.

On the other side of the Zeron, Hercules stirred in his bunk. Standing close to two meters tall in his socks, Hercules was easily the most deadly human I'd ever met. During my first week on the job, when enemy contact was still pretty common, I'd seen him rip the armored carapace right off a Scythian soldier's face and kill the alien with his bare hands. Hercules had one mission in life: to kill Scythians. Not for the first time, I wondered what all these Marines were going to do when they disbanded the Erasers. The rumors were rampant that this was our last run. I hoped so—although I'd never say it out loud to this crew.

Hercules flexed his massive biceps and ripped out a long, vibrating fart that would take the atmospheric scrubbers at least thirty minutes to dispel.

"For love of Mike, Hercules. Go in the can if you're gonna do that!" Gunnery Sergeant Madeline Jolly threw a shoe across the cabin that bounced off Hercules' quivering pecs.

"Sorry, Gunny." Hercules hung his head. "It just slipped out." Mambo feigned choking in the front of the ship.

Gunny peered over the Zeron, fixing her flat, gray stare on me. "How's it going, Noog?"

I pretended to make an adjustment to the system, uncomfortable as always in her gaze. "Nothing yet, Gunny. It looks like this run

might be a goose egg." I attempted a smile.

She slitted her eyes. "They're out there. I can smell them."

The only thing I smelled was the inside of Hercules' colon, but I just nodded, glad to have her turn her attention away from me. If you met Gunnery Sergeant Jolly as a civilian, you might think she was someone's middle-aged mother. Looks are deceiving. Despite the unfortunate surname of Jolly, the woman had all the emotional warmth of an arctic sunrise. Gunny was the heart of Eraser Seven, a legend in the Corps. In three years on the job, she'd lost only one team member—the sensors guy that I replaced. I guess the fact that they still called me New Guy after a year meant I was never going to measure up to my predecessor.

I went into sensors thinking that I'd serve out my enlistment far from the killing. A nameless drone on a fleet battleship somewhere, patrolling empty space. In training, I studied hard, finishing at the top of the class. They neglected to tell us that the top three students in each class were assigned to Epsilon Units.

That was my life: closet conscientious objector turned draftee with a front row seat to some the most brutal slaughter of aliens you could ever imagine.

Nearly two hours later, the Zeron chirped. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Gunny's gray bob snap up like a bird dog on point. We were passing over the mid-latitudes, and the signal showed up next to a large body of water. "Gunny, I got a hit!"

I took manual control and refined the scan. Six humanoids, with one bright trace that indicated a Scythian presence. A second, fainter Scythian trace popped up, then disappeared.

"Looks like five humans and one Scythian," I said.

"What the hell are they doing all the way out here?" Hercules asked. "Hostage situation?"

Gunny stood behind me, close enough that I could smell the stale sweat on her uniform. When I looked up, she was pinching her lips between her fingers. "Let's go check it out." She patted me on the shoulder. "Good work, Noogie. Feed the coordinates to Mambo and let's go hunting."

* * *

Sometime in the second decade of war, an organized movement of conscientious objectors called The Society emerged across the United Earth Federation. By that point, it was pretty clear we were going to win the war and The Society advocated for an end to the draft and peace negotiations with the Scythians. I knew about The

Society because I'd done a ton of research on them—secretly, of course—and even attended a few meetings. I'd even made a pledge to become a member when I turned eighteen. We know how that ended.

So when we approached the walled compound on Talos 5, I knew exactly what the five-sided bronze bell hanging from a post meant. This was a Society outpost.

"What's that?" Hercules raised the eyescan on his helmet and tapped the muzzle of his rifle against the bell. "Dinner bell?"

"That's a symbol that represents the fusion of Earth's five major religions," said a voice from behind the wooden door. "I would appreciate it if you would not touch it with a weapon of war."

"Gunnery Sergeant Madeline Jolly, ma'am. UEF Marines. We're here to take the alien you're harboring into custody."

A small window in the door opened up and a pair of blue eyes peered out. "You mean you're here to kill him."

"We're carrying out the lawful orders of the UEF, ma'am." I knew the kind of glacial stare Gunny was laying on the person behind the door, but the blue eyes never flinched. "You're aware of the Epsilon Directive?"

"I am," the voice shot back. "And your directive also forbids you from harming any humans in the execution of your duties. I believe you call it 'collateral damage.'"

Gunny cleared her throat. "That's correct, ma'am."

The door opened to reveal a slim woman in her thirties. Her face was deeply tanned and she wore a simple shift of soft gray that highlighted her eyes. She held out her hand to Gunny and smiled. "My name is Avalon. But you can call me 'collateral damage,' if you like. As long as you leave your guns outside and promise to enter in peace, you are welcome."

The woman's hand hung there for what seemed like a long time. I felt Hercules' bulk tense up beside me. Then Gunny stripped off her armored glove and shook Avalon's hand. "Herc, you stay here with the weapons. Noog, you're with me."

It was cool inside the compound and the sweet air emphasized how awful we smelled after two weeks without a shower. Avalon led us into a courtyard with a bubbling fountain and pointed to a low stone bench where we could sit. I could see Gunny's eyes sizing the place up and wondered if she planned to take out the alien right now. No, I decided, Gunny had a respect for the regs like no one I'd ever seen. She wouldn't risk hurting one of the humans. Besides, she'd given her word.

I slipped the handheld Zeron unit off my belt. The Scythian trace was strong now—we were definitely in the right place. Then a second trace ghosted onto the screen. I cursed to myself. I'd forgotten to run a

diagnostic on the Zeron to deal with that ghosting gremlin. I felt Gunny's eyes burning a hole in the side of my helmet.

"Problem, Noog?"

"No, Gunny. Just checking to make sure the target is still here."

She squinted at me. I braced for the inevitable follow-up question, but we were interrupted by Avalon returning to the courtyard.

I'd never seen a Scythian without his battle armor before. During indoc, we were taught how their warriors took hormones that induced the growth of chitin-based armor all over their bodies. The pictures they showed us were terrifying: seven-foot tall monsters covered with shiny brown scales that could stop an ordinary projectile round. They showed us pictures of dead Scythians who had personalized their armor with glyphs carved into the shell and weapons embedded in the growth. I suppose we were told this armor plating was a temporary state, but there were no pictures of a non-warrior Scythian in the briefing.

The alien was about my height and had striking translucent brown eyes that swept over Gunny and me with an intensity that bespoke intelligence. His skin had a leathery quality to it, sort of like an old football, and a pale scar ran down the right side of his head bisecting one of his earholes. He stepped out from behind Avalon and met Gunny's gaze without hesitation.

"I am K-Tor." He had a translator implant embedded in his left jawline which gave his voice a mechanical quality.

"I don't care," Gunny replied. "I'm here to take you away."

"You are here to—" the translator glitched and a snatch of his whirring chirpy language sneaked in. "Kill me," he finished.

If Gunny had stared at me like that, I'd already be dead.

"I have," the alien continued in a halting mechanical voice. "Sanctuary. Here."

"There is no sanctuary for killers. Our people are at war." Gunny bit off the words in the air like a snapping dog.

Avalon stepped between them. She pressed her hand against K-Tor's broad leathery chest and whispered up to him in what sounded like Scythian. I shot a look at Gunny, but she was still locked in a staring contest with the alien. K-Tor stepped back and Avalon turned to Gunny with a patient smile.

"You have your answer, Madeline." The use of her first name shocked Gunny into blinking. Avalon's smile widened. "This being is under the protection of The Society. He means you no harm and we are as far from inhabited space as we can be. I suggest you leave us in peace."

I'd never actually seen Gunny back down before, but it happened. She smiled—an actual smile, not her normal curled lip snarl—and

extended her hand to Avalon. “Maybe you’re right, ma’am.”

“Peace be upon you, Madeline.”

* * *

Gunny didn’t say anything until we were back in low orbit. She just stared out the viewport at the brown and green planet surface.

“No,” she said after three orbits of silence.

Hercules and I exchanged glances. “No, what?” he said.

“We’re here to do a job and we’re not leaving until it’s finished.”

“But they’re a religious group,” I said. “What about collateral damage?”

Gunny iced me with a glare. “You just mind your sensors and make sure that *thing* doesn’t try to make a run for it, Noog. I’ll handle the rest.”

I retreated to my workstation to set up a watch on the Scythian. K-Tor, I reminded myself. It was strange for me. I’d never met a Scythian before and now I’d seen one in the flesh, without his battle armor even. And he looked... human. That was ridiculous, of course. Scythians had a completely different genetic structure than us, didn’t reproduce the way we did, and lived in asexual communes—when they weren’t trying to destroy the human race. They were able to grow armor, for Christ’s sake. We had nothing in common with these aliens.

Still, I had a hard time getting K-Tor’s image out of my head.

The Zeron chirped as it locked onto the Scythian life sign. A second alien trace ghosted next to the first, then disappeared. I muttered an oath and punched up a calibration sequence. I wanted my sensors working perfectly for whatever Gunny was planning.

The presence of humans voluntarily shielding a Scythian was not something we’d seen before. At this point in the war, we were mostly hunting pairs or lone-wolf aliens. These holdouts were always hard-core fighters with nothing to lose. They knew we were coming in hot and they responded in kind. The battles were short, spectacular, and very, very messy. I’d only been on a handful of kill missions when we needed to separate humans from aliens. In those cases, I tracked the Scythian targets from a safe distance while Hercules and Gunny did the honors.

“You’re going in with me and Herc,” Gunny said. I wasn’t surprised, but the news settled like a stone in my stomach all the same. I acknowledged the order and checked the status of the calibration. One Scythian trace, nice and sharp, glowed brightly on the screen.

* * *

We approached The Society compound on foot an hour before dawn. Mambo had parked the ship in a gully half a klick back, waiting for our call.

The landscape was a mix of sand and sparse, waist-high scrub brush through which we moved at a fast trot toward our target. Sensors showed all six life forms stationary inside the compound, presumably sleeping. Gunny was not a complex person and neither was her plan: breach the compound, kill the alien, and beat feet. I was there to lead the assassins to the single target by the most direct route.

Gunny was on point and she slowed as the walls of the compound grew out of the landscape. She let us catch up, her breath a slight rasp in the darkness. “Alright, Noog, tell me where our target is hiding.”

Maybe it was the nervous energy of being on a kill mission, or maybe the nighttime run, but I was shaking. I detached the handheld sensor from my belt, but my armored gloves made my fingers feel like I was wearing metal sausages. The screen glowed and I saw the alien trace. Then a second one ghosted next to it.

“Dammit!” I tapped the screen. Too hard. The device fumbled off my glove and fell in the dirt. I dropped to my knees below the brush line to find the sensor. It was right next to my foot. And only one alien trace was showing on the screen. I breathed a sigh of relief as I reached for it.

Out of my peripheral vision, something moved in the dark. I yelped and scooted back, falling on my ass. The heads-up infrared display in my visor was clear, but I knew I had seen something move.

Gunny dropped to all fours next to me, her visor sweeping across the pitch blackness. She must have come to the same conclusion about the IR as I had because she flipped on the light on top of her helmet.

Imagine a scorpion the size of dog. The creature’s exterior was the mottled color of the sand, but it had raised itself into what looked to me like a fighting stance. Behind the animal, a flurry of miniature scorpion copies swarmed. A violent hiss filled the air and a barbed tail waved over its head like a harpoon. The whole world seemed to slow down for me as the tail stabbed down. It glanced off the armor on my thigh, leaving a deep gouge in the matte-black composite.

Gunny stepped in front of me. “Get him outta here, Herc!”

I felt myself being lifted; I was above the brush line again and stars studded the sky overhead. Pulses of energy flashed under the canopy, then Gunny popped up and she was sprinting after us. “Move!” she yelled.

I saw Gunny do a stutter-step and drop back into the brush. More flashes of pulsed energy, then she was up again and running toward

us.

We didn't stop until we were into the cleared area outside the compound. Gunny and Hercules knelt, weapons raised, ready to blow away whatever came out of the brush.

Nothing stirred.

We stayed that way for a full five minutes. I was listening so hard I'm pretty sure I stopped breathing.

"Noog?"

"Yeah, Gunny?"

"Check to see if our alien friend heard all that racket." I checked the sensor readout. None of the occupants of the compound had moved.

"I think we're good, Gunny."

She lowered her weapon and stood. "All right, gentlemen, let's complete our mission."

Then she fell flat on her face.

Hercules got to Gunny first and rolled her over. I snapped on my helmet light. Our squad leader's eyes were wide open, the muscles of her face rigid. Her pupils did not respond to the light. Hercules ran his hands over the armor on her legs. "She must have been bitten by that thing," he said. "Oh no." He pulled his hand from behind her right knee and it came away dark with blood. That's the one chink in a Marine's armor—to allow us to kneel.

The big man's hands shook as he found the catch on Gunny's armor. The swelling was so bad, I heard a sucking sound as he stripped the armor off her leg. It didn't even look like a leg anymore, more like a giant flaccid worm with tendrils of dark veins running through it.

"Mambo, this is Herc." His voice was breaking. "Medevac now—"

"Wait!" I said. "I have a better idea." I bolted to the five-sided bell and started ringing it as hard as I could.

* * *

Avalon stood in a pale nightgown made translucent by the glare of Hercules' helmet light behind her. She stared down at Gunny's body, her eyes taking in the ghostly white flesh of the still swelling leg and our battle gear.

"You were coming for K-Tor," she said.

"Yes," I replied. "But, please... help her. You must know what kind of animal did this."

The other two couples from the compound huddled behind her. The alien was nowhere to be seen. "Why?" Avalon said, her tone flat

and hard. “Why should I help you? You would have killed him—”

“If you help her, I promise you nothing will happen to the alien,” I said. “You have my word.”

“He has a name.”

“K-Tor,” I said almost screaming it. “His name is K-Tor. Please, help her. Before it’s too late!”

“What about him?” Avalon said, turning her glare on Hercules. “And the pilot? Do they agree to this?”

Hercules looked at me from beneath his visor, his face a mask of indecision. Finally, he nodded. “There! He said yes. Now please help her!”

Avalon’s eyes tracked from Gunny’s pale face to Hercules then back to me. She nodded. “Let’s get her inside.” Hercules started to kneel next to Gunny, but Avalon stopped him. “We’ll take it from here.” K-Tor appeared at her side as if she’d just conjured him up. He was bare to the waist, and his dark skin seemed to absorb rather than reflect light. He knelt next to Gunny and lifted her inert form while Avalon stabilized the injured leg. Gunny’s body was rigid in his arms. I wondered if we were too late.

“You stay here and wait for Mambo,” I said to Hercules. “Tell her the deal. The Scythian lives.”

“Gunny won’t like that deal, Noog.”

“Yeah, well, *if* she lives, she can kick my ass.” I tried to sound like the man in charge, but I had no authority to cut a deal with the enemy under any circumstances. I ran after Gunny’s body rather than wait for Hercules to figure out I was in over my head.

The medlab in the compound was modern, much better than I expected, and I was surprised to see K-Tor donning medical scrubs while Avalon started an IV in Gunny’s arm. She spoke to him in soft, whirring, chirpy sounds as she worked and he responded in kind.

“Yes, I’ve learned his language,” she said when I raised a questioning eyebrow. “He tells me I have the vocabulary of a preschooler.” K-Tor cracked a smile.

“He knows human anatomy? He’s a qualified doctor?”

Avalon faced me, and I got another dose of her withering blue eyes. “We’re both doctors, both very well qualified to deal with a nasty sandshark sting.” She flicked her hand toward the doorway. “You can stand over there. Out of our way.”

I stripped off my body armor and piled it in the corner, then leaned against the wall watching them work. K-Tor’s slender brown fingers gently probed Gunny’s leg as if searching for something. With his finger centered on a spot just above her knee, he held out his hand and Avalon dropped a laser scalpel in it. When he slashed across the white skin, a thick brown gel oozed out of the wound and a foul odor

filled the room. He inserted a pair of forceps into the incision and cocked his head while he fished around. Finally, he clamped the forceps closed and jerked them out. A hooked thorn about the size of my pinky finger was trapped between the blades of the surgical instrument.

The end of the thorn was wiggling like a worm on a hook.

"The sandshark buries a live parasite in its victim," the alien said in his mechanically translated voice. "We're lucky it hasn't multiplied yet."

I gulped.

K-Tor and Avalon set to work draining the brown ooze from Gunny's leg by cutting small incisions in the flesh and inserting drain lines. The laser scalpel flared and died, but both of them had their hands occupied. Avalon looked over her shoulder at me. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Noog—I mean, Tom." I got to my feet.

"Okay, Tom." She nodded her head at the far side of the room. "Around the corner is a supply closet. We need another Type M power supply for the scalpel."

I edged past them. The supply closet was next to a room with a thin curtain drawn across the opening. A soft light pulsed through the material.

"Third shelf from the top," Avalon called. I ran my finger along the edge of the shelf and found what I was looking for.

"Got it," I said, shutting the closet door. I angled my head so I could peek through the gap into the next room, then I pushed the curtain aside. A medical examination table dominated the center of the space. In the background, I could see a bank of monitors glowing. One flashed a message. I squinted to read the words: gene sequencing complete.

"Tom!"

I hustled back into the operating room with the power supply. Once they had drains inserted, they packed a heavy, green poultice around Gunny's limb and wrapped it until she looked like she had a tree trunk for a leg. I rested my head against the wall, watching them work, wondering. I was no medical expert, but I knew I'd just seen a very high-end genetics lab and I was watching two very skilled doctors.

The handheld sensor was hanging from my utility belt. I unclipped it and turned it on, holding it in my lap, dialing the sensor range down to the lowest and narrowest possible settings.

Two signals showed on my screen. Two Scythian signals. Avalon walked to the side of Gunny's bed, giving me a clear read on K-Tor. Strong signal. I angled the device toward Avalon.

I got another Scythian signal. Not as strong as K-Tor's, but an unambiguous alien signature.

Impossible, I told myself. Every report that had ever been published said our species were genetically incompatible. Everyone said so. I gathered my body armor and stood up. The Zeron scanner clattered to the floor. Avalon picked it up. She stared at it for a long moment before handing it back to me. "Thank you for your help, Tom." Her eyes sought mine, but I looked at the floor.

"I—I need to go tell the others Gunny's okay." I could feel her gaze burning a hole between my shoulder blades as I hurried out.

The sun was up, and early morning steam rose from the brush field where Gunny had been stung. I half ran past the five-sided bell and across the clearing to where Mambo had parked the *Fury*. She slapped a sleeping Hercules when she saw me running. "Is Gunny all right?" she asked.

I slowed to a walk. "Yeah. I just... needed to get out of there."

Mambo flipped her sunglasses onto her forehead. "What's the matter with you? You look like you just ate a turd."

I'd recorded the Zeron signals from the lab. My head was still reeling with what I thought I knew. Someone had figured out gene compatibility between humans and Scythians? Not only that, but Avalon, a human woman, was carrying an alien baby? I was a draftee for God's sake. This kind of stuff was way above my paygrade, and I wanted no part of it. I held out the scanner and started to speak but Hercules beat me to it.

"Is the alien still in there?" he said. He hefted his rifle in his massive paw.

I put the scanner back on my belt. "K-Tor's in there, yeah." Maybe I'd keep Avalon's secret to myself. For now.

Hercules and Mambo exchanged glances. "The alien's got a name now," Hercules said in a mocking tone. "Maybe I'll carve it into his forehead."

"You swore, Hercules," I said with more force than I intended. "Nobody touches K-Tor." I wasn't sure why I cared so much, but I did.

"You can't make a deal with a Scythian—we're at war, Noog," Mambo said.

I felt my face getting hot. "I made the deal with Avalon, a human. You're both Marines, and you will honor your word. Right?"

I realized too late that I was yelling at them. Not just yelling, but pacing up and down, waving my arms, delivering an all-in-their-personal-space dressing down worthy of Gunny. Hercules had a clenched jaw and Mambo dropped her sunglasses over her eyes.

"Right?" I repeated, still breathing hard and sweating even harder.

They both nodded. “Sure, Noog.” Mambo said.

“And my name is Tom,” I yelled back.

* * *

“Tom.” The voice was very faint, like someone was calling me from across a wide open field.

“Tom.” I startled awake, my head thrashing back and forth as I tried to remember where I was.

The familiar bulk of the Zeron console centered me. Back on the *Fury*, at my workstation. A puddle of drool had dried on the flat part of the console, and it felt like I had a keyboard imprinted on the side of my face.

“Tom, Madeline wants to see you,” Avalon said. I focused on her face. Her blue eyes still had that searching quality to them, but she was smiling.

“Gunny’s awake?”

“And asking for you. I’ve already taken the other two in to see her.” Her gaze lingered on the Zeron screen and I stood up to distract her. I’d spent most of the day preparing a data package we could send off to UEF Command about Avalon’s... condition. She looked at the screen and started laughing. “Looks like you’ve been sleepwriting.”

I followed her gaze. I had indeed fallen asleep on the keyboard. The screen was full of gibberish. Inwardly, I breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ll fix it later. Let’s go see Gunny.”

The sun was low and red on the horizon; I’d slept for hours. I had a sudden pang of indecision. Maybe I should have sent off the message to UEF, but this was the kind of thing that Gunny needed to know, especially since we’d agreed to let the alien—K-Tor—live. Maybe they’d want him as a specimen. And the baby, too. The political dimensions of this whole situation hurt my head. I needed Gunny to take it off my hands.

Mambo and Hercules were nowhere to be seen as Avalon led me through the compound to the medlab. Gunny was sitting up in bed. Her gray bob was a mess of finger-combed tangles, but she had color in her cheeks and she was alive. I smiled. “Gunny.”

“Corporal,” she said, a chill in her tone. My smile died and I instinctively came to attention. “I understand you made an agreement with this woman regarding my medical care.”

Avalon started for the door. “Maybe I’ll leave you two alone—”

“Stay, ma’am. I want to thank you for saving my life.”

“K-Tor is the real doctor,” Avalon said. “I’m more of a scientist, really. Geneticist by training.”

“Gunny,” I said, trying to put some urgency in my tone without alarming Avalon, “I need to speak with you.”

“Here’s the real doctor now,” Avalon said. K-Tor made some whirring sound behind me—probably a greeting—and I heard the slap of his bare feet on the tile.

Gunny’s eyes shifted over my shoulder. Her hand disappeared under the covers and reappeared holding a slim pistol. Mambo called it her “lady gun,” a five round old-school projectile weapon. Gunny fired right past me, so close I could feel the heat from the muzzle against my forearm. Again and again she fired until the weapon was empty. The shattering sound of the discharges deadened my hearing to a low hum.

I spun around. K-Tor was sprawled on the tile, leaking black blood everywhere, his bare torso stitched with five angry wounds. Avalon was on her knees, her mouth open in a scream, but all I could hear was the humming sound. A hand grabbed my collar, dragging me down until I was nose to nose with Gunny. Her sour breath washed over me and her growl barely penetrated my damaged hearing.

“Mission complete.”

* * *

In hindsight, I suppose Mambo and Hercules didn’t break their word to me. They didn’t pull the trigger that killed the alien.

K-Tor. His name was K-Tor, I reminded myself again.

Sure, Mambo gave Gunny the weapon, and Gunny never actually promised anything, so *technically* everyone had a clean conscience.

But I don’t live in a world of technicalities. I live in a world of actualities.

I could have rationalized what happened by saying that even if Gunny had died, the UEF would have sent another Eraser Unit to hunt the alien down. That’s probably true also.

It was dark when we left the planet’s surface. Mambo pushed the Gs harder than normal as we climbed like she couldn’t wait to get rid of the place. I wondered if she felt guilty about what had happened. I know I did.

However I turned it over in my head, I came back to the same place: I promised to keep K-Tor alive, and K-Tor was dead. That’s on me.

We paused in high orbit so Mambo could do her flight plan calcs to take us to the rendezvous point. Hercules was already asleep. Gunny was watching me.

“Had to be done, Tom,” she said.

I didn't react to the fact that she'd used my actual name. Instead, the only thing I could think about was Avalon's soundless scream.

"Course laid in, Gunny," Mambo called out. "Our uplink is hot if you want to transmit now."

"Tom," Gunny said again.

Avalon's scream was just on the edge of my hearing now, overpowering the hiss of the electronics around me and Hercules' gentle snoring. At least she was still alive, I told myself. That was something.

"Corporal!" Gunny's voice cut through the images in my head.

"Sorry, Gunny. What was that?"

"Do you have our Kill Report ready to transmit?"

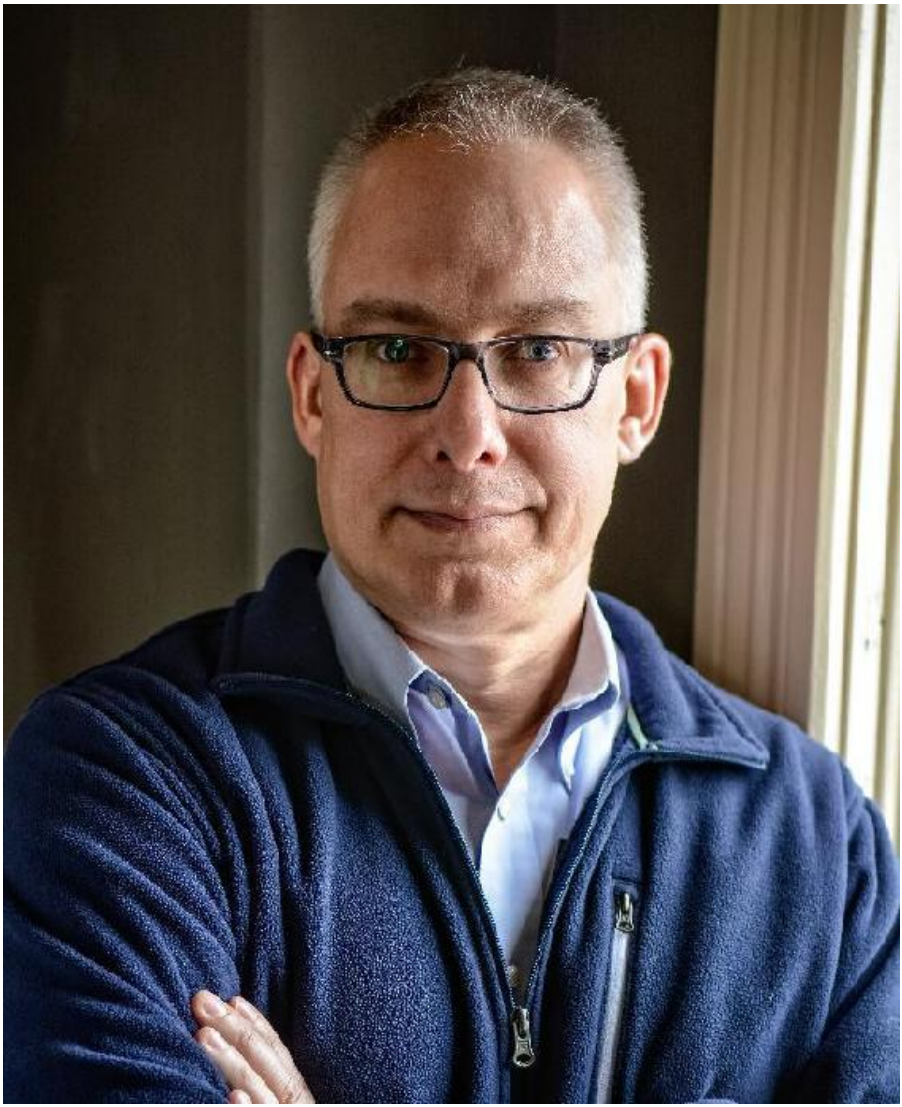
"Just finishing it now, Gunny." The Kill Report was a simple form. How many aliens killed, what planet, time and date. There was a space for amplifying details but no one ever used it. All anyone cared about was the body count. I loaded it into the transmit queue.

My message about Avalon and cross-species genetics was there already, complete with Zeron data files.

I deleted it.

"Kill Report ready to transmit, Gunny."

Q&A with David Bruns



Where did this story come from?

Honestly, it was my wife's idea. Christine has eye rolled over my sci-fi obsession through more than a quarter-century of marriage, but she still reads every story I write—regardless of genre—and I love her for it. But at the oddest times, she'll blurt out an idea and say, "You should write a story about *that*." (I believe "The Epsilon Directive" idea came out of an episode of *Vice*.) When those moments strike, I just write the ideas down and let them cook for a while.

As for the writing part, I love taking tried and true sci-fi tropes and giving them a little twist to add some fun to the story. And really, isn't everything better with a surprise ending?

How does this story fit with other things you've written?

I write sci-fi under my own name and modern-day thrillers with a career naval intelligence officer and friend, JR Olson. He does the plotting and I do the writing for novels with names like *Weapons of Mass Deception*, about nuclear terrorism, and *Jihadi Apprentice*, about homegrown radicalism.

When I'm not trying to save our current world from itself, I like to make up worlds to save. I've written a sci-fi/fantasy series called *The Dream Guild Chronicles* about a series of first contact experiences from the perspective of the aliens as well as number of sci-fi short stories. See http://davidbruns.com/books-stories/ for a complete list.

What are you working on now?

At the moment, I'm taking a break from thrillers to write a military sci-fi novel set in Nick Webb's Legacy Fleet world. The new book is called *Invincible*, and is scheduled for release in Kindle Worlds on September 15, 2016. Here's the tagline:

> *The Swarm took away her ship. Commander Addison Halsey plans to take it back.*

If this sounds like your kind of book, get on my mailing list for an advance review copy.

Just an Old-Fashioned Lust Story
by *Christopher J. Valin*

THERE I WAS, surrounded by five of the deadliest scumbags in the galaxy. Five guys who had murdered some of the baddest of the bad. They were taking aim at me, and all I could think about was making sure she was safe.

But I wouldn't exactly call it a love story.

A lust story, maybe. Is that a thing? All I know is, I would have done anything for her. Anything at all. And she wasn't even human.

Don't go getting any crazy ideas. It's not like she was a lizard or a Tovarian Devil Slug or anything like that. She was humanoid. Ish.

She had mostly the right parts, except for the third mammary appendage and an extra orifice that I won't discuss in polite company. But other than that, she could have walked around any city on Earth without getting too many second glances. Well, not for the fact that she wasn't human, anyway. She certainly got a lot of looks on account of how beautiful she was.

A few too many, if you're the jealous type. Not that *I'd* know anything about that...

Maybe I should start from the start now that I've laid down all that interesting foundational info.

You know how you've seen a million holo-vids where some rich yahoo hires a scumbag to track down his girl because she got tired of him, or left with a bunch of his credits, or fell in love with another yahoo, or some combo of the above? Well, there's a reason there's a million of them. It's because it's something that happens when a woman thinks all she needs is a rich guy to take care of her and she'll be happy, and then it turns out that being rich isn't all it's cracked up to be, especially when you're not attracted to a guy who feels like he has a right to slobber all over you any time he gets the urge.

Buuuuuut it also turns out it's hard to give up the credits once you've been mainlining them for a stretch. So, you try to get the best of both worlds. The easiest way is the divorce route, but most of these yahoos are smart enough to get a prenup, so that's usually out. The nastiest way is to make sure he has a big insurance policy, or added you to his will, and then off him the first chance you get and hope you don't get caught. And then there's the dangerous way, which is finding some scumbag to help you get a hold of a good portion of his credits, and then escape into a life where you can spend the credits without the hassle of all that slobbering.

I'm sure you noticed I mentioned both sides making use of a

scumbag. And that's because, in this particular case, I happened to be said scumbag for both sides.

You see, Xiomara—that was her name, or rather the Earth standard approximation of it—had decided to try to extricate some credits for herself without any assistance, knowing full well that anyone she chose to assist her would probably insist on some slobbering of his own. And, because she's good at pretty much everything she does, she darn near got away with it. In fact, if her husband hadn't hired the best of the best to track her down, she would have.

Now, I don't usually toot my own horn unless there's a serious need to toot it, but I should probably clarify here that I happen to be the aforementioned best of the best. It's a formerly disputed fact that is no longer in dispute. Because if those who disputed it had been correct, then *they* would currently be considered the best rather than what they *are* considered.

Which is deceased.

So this guy—let's call him Big Hank (since that was, after all, his name)—hired me to track down his wife and his credits, and return the one he still actually cared about (hint: it didn't have three breasts) and get rid of the other.

Now, I'm not going to pretend that she fell for me as soon as we laid eyes upon one another, or even that *I* fell for *her*. Especially the former, since I'm not much to look at myself. But she knew she was dead if she didn't get me over to her side somehow, and she happened to have certain attributes that I found very appealing. So we quickly came to an... understanding.

* * *

Interlude: There's an ancient Earth song that still streams the metanet occasionally with the metaphor of driving in the passing lane of a land highway, by a band named after an extinct bird of great import to the old Earth United States of America. You may know it—I'm not going to quote it because I don't want to owe half a year's pay just to mention it, but you can still find it without too much effort. In the song, there's a couple of ne'er-do-wells who run around drinking and snorting intoxicants and generally having one big party all the time.

Well, our life became a lot like that song, except instead of driving around what's now become the great salt flats on Earth in a vehicle running on combustible fossil fuels, we were blasting around the galaxy in my ship, the Red Raptor, spending Big Hank's credits

like they were about to expire. We also may or may not have stopped by some of the galaxy's most affluent neighborhoods and financial institutions on occasion to refill our coffers. I'm not one to incriminate myself, so I'll leave all that to your imagination.

In addition, we often made an appearance at the best pasta joints we could find. Xiomara loved her some pasta, and couldn't get enough of it. We'd always get extra to have later on board ship. I even got pretty good at whipping some up in my small galley when she got desperate. Turned out she enjoyed my pasta as much as the stuff at the fanciest places. At least, that's what she told me.

* * *

Hank...

Well, Hank was not happy.

There were a lot of reasons why Hank felt that way. Not the least of which was that he'd hired me, and there's obviously no way the second-best scumbag would be able to take me down, even in the awful state I was in a good deal of the time. Or even the second and third best scumbags together, for that matter. But the second through sixth best? That would be a problem. And, thanks to Hank, it did become my problem.

I took to calling them the Cinque, just because I thought it sounded cooler if I was being chased by a posse by that name instead of just five regular scumbags. I'd been working with and against these guys for years, depending on the circumstances, with the exception of the guy who was Number Five with a bullet. Never met him because he was new to the business of doing what we do, but he was what you might call a "rising star."

Plus, I didn't actually know any of their names. I hadn't bothered to learn them before, even when I was working with them, and I wasn't about to start then. So I just referred to them as "Two" through "Six."

* * *

Before I get into too much detail about these new scumbags, let me first tell you a little bit more about myself. I could tell you I had a horrible childhood, but that would be putting much too rosy of a spin on things. I was orphaned on a barren rock of a planetoid called Finnegan's Centaur, way out in the middle of the Reach, which had been abandoned by the mining company because it hadn't been

turning much of a profit.

You'd think they'd let the miners and merchants who were there know, and maybe even provide some transport out of there. But that would be giving them too much credit. They decided it was cheaper just to leave everyone and everything there, figuring it would sort itself out one way or another.

And, boy, did it.

At first, everyone just thought the supply ships were running late. Maybe a schedule mix up or some such. But then it started to be a while, and supplies were running low, so the supervisors attempted to call out to headquarters to find out what was what.

But the comm stations were one of the few items that were actually worth anything on this miserable rock, and the last ships out had quietly taken them, along with anything else they thought was worth saving. From what I can gather, one of the crew thought my mom fit that category, because I never saw her after that last ship left. I'd like to think she was forced into leaving and pleaded for them to take me along too, but I wasn't so young that I don't remember what she was like, and I find that version of the story to be highly unlikely. The truth is, she was probably passed around the crew until they were tired of her, and then tossed out an airlock.

My dad was the closest thing to law enforcement that existed in our small community. He wasn't a pleasant man, which actually helped him in his job, and he was highly proficient with a blaster. But when the truth about the company had been discovered and the rioting started, he was one of the first to be killed.

Which left me in quite a predicament. Because I was barely seven sols old.

Being the only kid on that godsforsaken rock actually had its advantages, including the fact that nobody ever thought to childproof anything. I don't mean putting guard rails up and plugging empty sockets. I mean there were lots of ways someone my size could get in and around pretty much everyplace in that small settlement because nobody thought to make it otherwise.

I swiftly learned that I could go practically anywhere without being seen, and that meant I could take whatever I needed from whoever had it. And if what I needed to take was a person's life, then I took that. Within a few months I was so good at sneaking up and slitting someone's throat that they never even knew I was there.

Sneak.

Slit.

Steal.

Repeat.

That was my life for years—I lost track of how many—until there

was no longer anything to steal, or anybody to steal from. Eventually, I was on my way to starving, and there was nothing that was going to prevent it. Truth to tell, I had become somewhat feral.

Then a ship showed up. From what I gathered, they needed to do some repairs that required them to land, and this was the closest place. While they were taking a look around, I stowed away aboard the ship.

I sometimes wonder if they might have treated me okay if I had just explained my situation, either before or after I snuck on board the ship. But after they discovered a couple of crewmembers with slit throats, there was no way they were going to welcome me.

Unlike the mining settlement, this ship was too small for me to stay hidden forever. The smell alone was enough to give me away.

I'll give them credit. They didn't just shoot me once they caught me. That's what I would have done in their shoes.

But that might have been a favor compared to what happened next. They dropped me off at an Imperial hub and had me arrested. They showed holo-pics of the carnage at the mining town, and said I had murdered some of their men the same way.

Turned out I had actually killed more people than anyone they'd ever heard of. I didn't even get why it was a big deal, considering it had been my life for so long.

Imperial trials being what they are, it didn't take long for me to be processed, convicted, then tossed onto a prison station orbiting a gas giant. Nobody had ever escaped from this place in all the decades it had been spinning around the planet. Until me, that is.

But it took years for me to do it. By that time, I had grown a lot. I wasn't the biggest, but I was big. And I wasn't the toughest, but I was tough. Nobody could fight like me.

And nobody could beat me.

Of course, someone with my history doesn't have a whole lot of options when it comes to a profession, so after I escaped I went with the one that came naturally. The polite way to describe me would be bounty hunter. A closer term would probably be assassin, at least in most cases. But the reality is that I usually get paid to be a cold-blooded killer.

* * *

So. Back to my story.

As I was saying, Xiomara and I were blasting around the galaxy, slobbering all over each other and having a grand old time.

Then the Cinque showed up.

They caught up to us on Synius Prime, out on the edge of nowhere. We had landed the Raptor on a plateau with an astonishing view of Broneah Falls—you'd have to see it to believe it—and had been holed up there for about a week, enjoying the scenery and each other, when these boys showed up in their ships.

The first thing we did was try taking the easy way out. I powered up the Raptor's reactor in emergency mode—not the safest move in the world, but then, neither is being shot at by a quintet of the galaxy's best bounty hunters. We were out of the atmosphere in seconds, and past Synius Prime's orbit soon after. They were fast, but I own a modified Imperial recon vessel (I'll explain that some other time—I don't want to slow down the momentum), so we were going to be outrunning them right quick.

But one of their better shots—probably Four, from what I've seen—hit us with a blast from his ion cannon. We felt the ship jolt violently as the beam tore into our starboard engine. We weren't going to be going anywhere for long.

I performed my fanciest flying maneuvers through that system, but I couldn't shake them without the extra juice. And I'm a fairly decent pilot. May have even won some pretty big piloting competitions (oops, there I go tooting again). I whipped around asteroids, flew through the rings of a gas giant, and reversed course a few times to try to lose them.

But, again: Five to one. And so it goes.

I pulled up the nav charts, desperate to figure something out.

Then I realized where I was. Coincidence? Probably. Or maybe I'm just so good that my subconscious figures these things out without me noticing. Toot, toot.

As the Cinque closed in on us, I kicked in the afterburners and blasted out toward the furthest planets in the system, including Finnegan's Centaur.

We almost didn't make it to the barren rock that had been my first home and my first prison. Almost.

When we were getting close to the former settlement, I slowed down just enough to make them think they'd be able to hit me. Then I flipped around and flew between Four and Six. Four got off a shot, since that was his area of expertise, but I dropped down right when I knew he'd shoot, and the beam sliced through Six's ship. I didn't watch for long, but I did see it fall toward the planetoid in two pieces.

I finally began firing back instead of just running, now that the odds were slightly more even. I almost hit a couple of them, even with my damaged ship. That was enough to scatter the four scumbags who were left long enough for me to get down to the settlement.

I managed to nestle the Raptor into the main landing port and get

off the ship with Xiomara before the other ships had a chance to land. There were no lights, and it would have been exceedingly difficult for someone to put a ship down if they weren't already familiar with the place, especially in the smaller auxiliary ports.

We headed for the main warehouse, since that would offer us a lot of chances to stay hidden. It was also where I'd set up shop as a kid after nobody else was left, since it was so big that I would occasionally come across a crate of supplies that hadn't been found by anyone else and extend my miserable life another week or two. Ah, good times.

The past couple of decades hadn't been kind to the abandoned settlement. It was a ghost town, with most of its ghosts having been created by yours truly. It was in such bad shape that it looked like nobody had been there for hundreds of years. Structures were crumbling, wood was rotting, and a heavy layer of dust covered everything.

The warehouse was just a smaller version of the settlement itself, full of stacks and shelves of crates that were either empty or filled with things that were no longer needed after the mining company had abandoned it.

It didn't take long for Two through Five to find me, since they had tracking equipment just like I did. But I knew the radiation from some of the rocks they used to mine there would foul up their scanners enough that they wouldn't be able to pinpoint us exactly.

Their first mistake was splitting up. They probably figured they'd find us faster that way, and that it would've been easier for me to kill them quickly if they were in a group.

But individually, they'd lost their only advantage over me. Now that it was one on one, they didn't stand a chance.

Once Xiomara was relatively safe and had her blaster at the ready, I climbed up to one of my favorite spots, on top of the highest rack of shelves in the warehouse. From there I got a bead on the locations of Three and Four, with Three being just below me. Three was from the planet Morivar, which meant he was taller than a human, and much thinner. Morivarians were good at a lot of things, especially tracking, but hand-to-hand combat was not one of them.

Since I didn't want to give away my position, I jumped down on him from above, knocking him to the permacrete floor in the process. After that, I shut him up with a few punches before he was able to yell for the others. Then it was just a matter of hitting his head hard enough against the floor to make sure he wouldn't wake up again.

I went back to check on Xiomara and told her where Four was, and she informed me that she had spotted Five. I tried to convince her to stay where she was, but she insisted on going after Five herself. The truth was, she could take care of herself better than almost anyone I'd

ever met. I had no right to tell her to stay put, any more than she had a right to tell me.

We went in opposite directions, and I found Four right away. His species had four arms, and he was a two-gun man. At the moment, both were drawn and at the ready. I climbed on top of a crate to get the advantage, but the top had started rotting away, and it splintered as I stood on it. As I lost my balance, Four spotted me and took aim.

Then, the sound of blaster fire echoed through the warehouse. He turned for just a split second when he heard it, and that was a split second too long. I fired and put a smoking hole through his forehead before he had finished turning his head back in my direction.

I ran toward the sound of blaster fire, but I couldn't find Xiomara right away. I started to worry, but then Xiomara came back around and told me she had taken out Five. I was relieved to find out that the sound I'd heard was her blaster killing him, and not the other way around.

One left: Number Two. I told her to wait there while I circled around. That way she could get him if he came to her, and I could get him if he was still out there. I knew which direction he'd probably be approaching from, and I also knew how to get back behind where he'd be coming from.

While Four had been the best shot of the bunch in a ship, Two approached my own skill in hand-drawn blasters. He was from a colony with heavy gravity, so he was quick, and his reflexes were faster than any non-enhanced human I'd ever seen. I had to be extra careful, since it would probably be a matter of who drew on whom first. I spotted him creeping up on Xiomara's location, so I started creeping up on *him*. I couldn't fit in the same small spaces as I used to back in the day, but I hadn't lost my touch, either. I probably should have just pulled out my gun and finished it fast, but something came over me.

I pulled my blade instead.

I don't know what was going on in my head—whether I wanted to see if I could still do it, or if I thought it might give me some kind of thrill I hadn't felt in decades—but I made the spectacularly stupid move of trying to slice his throat. Within seconds, I was behind him, and I saw him tense for a split second as he realized I was there.

But it was too late. I grabbed him by the hair, pulled his head back, and sliced.

As I let him fall to the ground, I saw that Xiomara was at the end of the aisle I was standing in. I smiled at her and thought about how great things were going to be now that those scumbags were taken care of. Nobody else would even be able to come close to taking us out.

I found it curious that she didn't smile back, but I immediately found out why.

I heard the quick whine of a blaster, and the next thing I knew, I had an extra orifice of my own. Before I felt the pain, I noticed my legs were no longer working, and I dropped to the floor like a sack of plantains. I held my hand over the hole through my middle to stem the extensive bleeding, and twisted around as best I could to see who'd shot me. The handsome face that smiled at me was not one I was expecting to see again.

Number Five was still alive. Xiomara was a good shot—almost as good as me from what I'd seen the past few weeks—so I don't know how she could have thought she'd gotten him when he obviously looked perfectly fine.

That meant there was a problem. But before I could fully figure it out, I blacked out.

Luckily, I wasn't out for long, and Five hadn't bothered to shoot me in the head in the interim. I guess the crimson pond beneath my body was enough for him to assume I'd died when I passed out.

It didn't take a whole lot of calculating to figure out what was going on here.

Sure enough, when I popped my head up to check out the situation, Five and Xiomara were making googly eyes at each other. And not the love at first sight kind, either. More of the "Soon we'll be together forever, my love" kind.

I might not be the brightest star in the sector, but I know when I've been had. That's right: I had an honest-to-goodness *femme fatale* on my hands. Apparently, she'd made a deal with Five—or maybe they were genuinely together from the start, I don't know—and now they were getting rid of all the competition, including me.

But they'd made the colossal error of thinking I was dead. Not that I was far off. The shot had gone through my lower abdomen, and not only did it hurt like hell, I wasn't able to walk. Depending on which organs were hit, I may or may not have survived long enough to get patched up. But I was determined to take them both down either way.

I snuck another peek and saw Five grab Xiomara in his arms and plant a kiss on her lips. Those luscious lips. It made my stomach turn and my chest clench up. Of course she'd want to be with that jackhammer with his holo-flick good looks. Why would I ever think she'd really wanted to be with me?

While he was macking on her, I slowly crawled back around to find my weapon, which had flown out of my hand when I was shot. As far as I knew, they didn't notice me moving, but I stopped cold when I saw what happened next.

Still locked in Five's arms, Xiomara pointed her weapon at the back of his head and blew it clean off. Interesting twist there. That would have left her home free.

If I'd actually been dead, that is.

Gravely wounded as I was, I still managed to grab my weapon from the floor next to me and point it at her. She sensed it, just as I was ready to shoot. Her surprised expression momentarily morphed into that seductive gaze that had conned me for weeks. I almost couldn't do it.

But I squeezed the trigger. The blast went clean through her middle breast. Dammit, that was my favorite one, too. She dropped to the floor immediately. As the blood pooled under her body, I managed to drag myself along the floor to be near her. Our blood was mingling together, my red and her blue, as our lives had briefly done up until that point.

"Was it worth it?" I asked.

"It... would have... been..." she replied, with a great deal of effort.

"I take it none of it was real?" I had a hard time getting it out, but I'm sure that was just due to my injuries.

"The pasta was good." The slightest smile. Then the lights went out in her stunning violet eyes, and she was done.

For some reason the hole in my gut was also causing my eyes to leak. Not sure what the connection was there.

* * *

I returned to Earth as soon as I was recovered enough to fly there, and with the help of a Tranrian vorpal blade, six electrocell crystals, and some duct tape, I soon had Hank telling me everything. Actually, he was ready to talk as soon as I walked into his office, but I needed to release some of my frustration on someone.

I want to say I let Hank live after he spilled the truth along with the contents of his stomach. But we don't always get what we want.

Not only had Xiomara not stolen his money, she had paid *him* to play the part and to hire me to put everything in motion. That was her plan. Get me on her side, then hire the rest of the best to come after us so we'd all take each other down. Which would have left her as the new Numero Uno. Instead, she just put a bigger distance between me and whoever was the new Number Two.

She was never a trophy wife at all. She was just another bounty hunter.

Q&A with Christopher J. Valin

What made you decide to write this type of story?

I've had an idea for a space opera story about a bounty hunter anti-hero kicking around in my head for quite some time now, but I was busy writing other stories and screenplays. After working mostly on my YA superhero series recently, I felt like I needed to do something a little racier, more adult, with a humorous tone. When I saw the call for submissions for this anthology (I really enjoyed the previous two), it prompted me to finally sit down to write it. I had a really good time working on it.

Why a bounty hunter?

People seem to like the whole idea of bounty hunters (including me), especially in science fiction. I mean, Boba Fett hardly does anything in the Star Wars films, and he's one of the most popular characters. There's kind of automatically a certain element of danger

and badass-ness to them.

I take it you're a Star Wars fan?

Most definitely. At the age of nine, I read the novelization before the film even came out. Then the movie blew my mind. I had already been a Star Trek fan since I was even younger, but watching that story on the big screen was a life-changing event for me. I was even in the documentary *The People vs. George Lucas*, which is about Star Wars fans.

What projects are you currently working on?

At the moment, I'm finishing up the second part of the Red Raptor Files, which is my YA superhero series. The first book was called *Sidekick*, and the second will be *Super-Team*. I also have stories appearing in a couple of other anthologies right now: The Legacy Fleet anthology set in Nick Webb's universe, and *Capes & Clockwork 2*, which has my second story about my steampunk superhero, Agent Eagle.

How can readers keep up with your writing and follow you?

I have a page on Facebook, a Twitter account (@valinchris), and a website, christophervalin.com. And, of course, there's always my author page on Amazon at Amazon/ChristopherJValin.

Christopher J. Valin is a writer, artist, teacher and historian living in the Los Angeles area with his wife and two children. He has written stories of all kinds since childhood, including novels, short stories, comic books, and screenplays. In 2009, his biography of his 5x great-grandfather, *Fortune's Favorite: Sir Charles Douglas and the Breaking of the Line*, was published by Fireship Press. In addition to writing and inking for independent comic book companies and writing screenplays for production companies, Christopher has had numerous short stories published in anthologies such as *Capes & Clockwork: Superheroes in the Age of Steam* and *Doomed: Tales of the Last Days*.

The Quarium Wars
by *E.E. Giorgi*

YULIA WAS DEAD. Gone were the rolling green hills and the steep cliffs overlooking the black ocean, the blue mountains that turned purple at night, and the deep craters that in the warm season filled with crimson blossoms.

Zakahryans, the locals called them—pools of blood.

Their name was no longer a metaphor.

Ashes rained on Hyleesh's military uniform, gently tapping on his helmet. He wiped them off the visor and stared at the red sky, the distant sun a pale disk obfuscated by smoke.

Thick, yellow mist draped the horizon, heavy with the stench of death. Waves silently lapped at the skeleton of a collapsed wharf. Bodies knotted with kelp rolled along the tideline, forming one long cordon of rotten flesh.

Everything on Yulia was dead. Not even flies came out to feast on the cadavers.

A dull, persistent ringing filled the air, as though the voices of the millions that had died on Yulia had joined in one relentless cry.

The city of Sunan had been the last to fall. The plasma artillery the locals had hidden deep in the forest had done very little against the Yaxees' PPBs—pulse propulsion bombs. Wrapped in a thin shell of titanium and suspended in a perfectly spherical magnetic field, one microgram of Quarium had vaporized the whole city in a matter of seconds.

It had taken less than 48 hours and nineteen PPBs to wipe out the whole planet. One week later, flames still marred the crests and pinnacles of the mountain peaks, and black plumes of smoke drifted off the cliffs and over the ocean.

Sunan had crumbled to dust. The holes of cracked open buildings gaped into nothingness, torn steel cables strummed in the breeze.

Hyleesh's boots left deep prints in the dry soil. His heart was heavy, yet his soul empty. He'd come searching for survivors but he'd found none.

Yulia wasn't his planet, the dead weren't his people.

So why was he here?

A deep, low rumble resonated from the north side of the shore. Hyleesh squeezed his weapon and gaped at the trail of dust and black smoke rising in the distance. The rumble grew closer until it became the distinct roar of half a dozen SATVs—special armored tactical vehicles.

They're here.

The realization that he wasn't alone on this stranded planet left him strangely indifferent. He poised his weapon, planted his boots, and stared at the wreckage of Sunan as the wake of black smoke grew bigger.

Five-foot tall tires tore through the collapsed structure of the wharf, squashing bloated bodies and digging out sand as they propelled forward. Hyleesh counted five fully armed vehicles and three mosquitos—small, air-land tanks that came equipped with all-terrain crawler legs and rotor blades for rapid take off. A sixth SATV lagged behind. It was much larger—a twenty seater at least, Hyleesh reckoned, and, unlike its tan companions, this one was completely black.

Black, like the Yaxee death.

They detected Hyleesh at about twelve hundred feet away. The black SATV slowed down while the rest of the vehicles veered in his direction and picked up speed until he was completely surrounded.

Hyleesh looked up at the darkened cockpits and didn't move.

Eventually, the engines died, and the wind blew away the last whiff of exhaust.

"Soldier," a metallic voice called from one of the SATVs. "Identify yourself."

He was wearing a plain soldier uniform. He'd forgotten about that. He stuck the butt of his rifle in the sand and removed his helmet.

The wind howled from the smoking cliffs. The voices of the dead rang in his ears. Hot air blew sand and ashes in his face, the salt on his lips making his skin prickle.

The cockpits of the five smaller SATVs popped open. Rope ladders dropped out of the top, and soldiers climbed down the vehicles carrying weapons, drills, pipes, and other pieces of equipment.

The black SATV at the back whirred. A lateral door lifted, and a platform lowered to the ground. The face remained in shadow, but the uniform Hyleesh recognized immediately—black with red insignia on the shoulders and sleeves, as official missions mandated.

General Zika, a.k.a., the Yaxee death.

Sleek ankle boots walked down from the platform and into the sand. A silk cape whispered in the charged air. The face came out of the shadow. It was a scarred face, hard, with a crooked nose and skin so thin you could trace blue capillaries pulsing beneath it. The eyes were as clear as ice.

"Captain Weber," General Zika said. "What a surprise to find you here on Yulia."

"I would say so," Hyleesh replied, watching the soldiers form a ring around the two of them. "Quite unexpected to find any presence

at all here on Yulia after the last deadly raids."

A proud sneer twisted Zika's thin lips. He waved a gloved hand at the devastation around them—the bodies washed to shore, the ruins of Sunan, the burning cliffs. "Indeed. I'd say the disinfestation was successful."

A foul aftertaste filled Hyleesh's mouth. *Bastard.*

Zika's eyes narrowed. "Still. What's the *infamous* Captain Weber, son of the pluri-medaled *Colonel* Weber, doing here? I believe your father is in Sarai right now. Weren't you supposed to be with him, leading your own battalion?"

Hyleesh hooked the helmet under his arm and picked up his rifle from the sand. "I'm headed back there," he lied. "I had to come in person to let you know that you made a mistake, General. There's no Quarium on Yulia."

Zika's eyes widened, the ice in them hardened. One of the soldiers came out of the lines. "General—"

Zika flicked a hand in the air. "Go start testing the water. Now!"

The troops scrambled off, their gear clanging on their backs. They set the tools down on the sand a few yards away and started shoveling. Two men waded into the water and collected samples.

"I don't know where you get your information, Weber," Zika said, watching them. "I trust my intelligence. We had information that pointed to a Quarium reservoir here on Yulia big enough to destroy the entire Old System. We tried to negotiate with them. They refused." He waved a hand at the ruins of Sunan looming in the distance and shrugged. To him, what happened next was the natural consequence the people of Yulia brought upon themselves.

"If they had that much Quarium," Hyleesh interjected, "how come they never used it to defend themselves?"

Zika squinted, one of the blue capillaries in his temple bulged. "It was a matter of time. We were faster." He gave Hyleesh a long, hard look and then added, "I suggest you stay out of this, Captain. Sarai will be a hard enough nut to crack for you and your father. May I get you an escort to your ship?"

Hyleesh sent one last glance to the men working on their Quarium quest and shook his head. He could get to his ship all right. The problem was that Zika's men were in the way. He swung the rifle over his shoulder, shook the sand off his boots, and walked away.

"Good luck with the Quarium quest, General," he called. "What planet are you going to destroy unneccesarily next?"

He spotted a shadow peeking at him from the open door of the black SATV. It waited for him to pass, then slid out of the vehicle and ran to the general. Hyleesh turned and recognized Egon, Zika's closest counselor, a skull face that never left his patron's side. His black gown

and aquiline nose made him look like a crow. He probably made love to the General, too, when slaves weren't around to provide such services.

Egon cupped a hand around his ashen face and whispered something in the General's ear. Whatever news he delivered, it didn't look good. Zika's eyes darted to Hyleesh.

"Come back, Weber!" he called.

He heard it in the general's voice. *Word's out.* Hyleesh flashed a nonchalant smile while quickly assessing his options. The General didn't buy the smile. Egon had already turned to the soldiers, probably mouthing orders in his radio mic.

Hyleesh dropped his helmet, ran to one of the mosquitos, and climbed into the small cockpit.

"Traitor!" yelled Egon. "He committed mutiny!"

The soldiers dropped their equipment, grabbed their weapons, and ran back. Hyleesh worked the mosquito's controls until the engine whirred and the aircraft took off, its robotic legs retracting under the fuselage.

Hyleesh had never flown these gadgets. The aircraft was so light compared to his sturdy ship he could feel the wind rocking him right and left. He pulled the collective and steered back toward the city. A flurry of HPNs—high power neutrino beams—skidded against the fuselage, causing all sorts of emergency diodes on the dashboard to flash.

Hyleesh pushed the throttle and increased the velocity. The aircraft rattled and swung forward. Two other mosquitos flanked him, closing in on both sides. Hyleesh saw them coming, jerked the collective, and dipped the aircraft down and forward. The two mosquitos slammed one against the other, and pieces of metal ricoched off Hyleesh's windshield, denting it. One of the colliding aircraft lost two rotors, tilted, and flew off sideways. The other one continued its pursuit.

The SATVs followed from the ground, black wakes of exhaust trailing behind them. As soon as Hyleesh entered the space above Sunan, though, the big vehicles slowed down as they painfully crawled over piles of rubble.

Hyleesh dropped in altitude and begin to zigzag through the crooked skyline of the city. The other mosquito was relentless. Hyleesh dipped under a partially fallen overpass and squeezed between its broken pillars, but his pursuer was just as agile.

Some of the buildings that had survived the bombings started crumbling as the two mosquitos flew by. Hyleesh zipped through a narrow alley and debris from the facing towers started raining down on them. Something hit one of the rotors, making the aircraft spin.

The other mosquito flew over him and pried at the rest of the rotors with its robotic legs. Hyleesh plummeted. He popped the windshield, unbuckled, and moments before the mosquito touched ground, he jumped out of the cockpit and through one of the open windows of the closest building.

The aircraft shattered in a cloud of fragments. The engine exploded, flames shot high up between the two facing towers. Hyleesh never knew what happened to the other mosquito. The heat wave blasted through the broken windows, lifted him up, and slammed him several feet away. He rolled on debris, shards piercing through his skin and heat lapping at his feet. A rumble shook the walls around him. He felt the quiver from the ground and ran, right as the ceiling collapsed and a thick cloud of dust and debris enveloped him.

* * *

Quarium. The word echoed in his head like a bitter medicine. Quarium was energy, power, wealth. *Death.* This unique molecule only existed in remotest parts of the galaxy, in the seabed detritus of icy cold oceans. That's where the Yaxees had first found it on Aplaya —their home planet. No, not home. The one they conquered and settled on after destroying their own.

Because that's what the Yaxees were.

Destruction.

Something hard pressed against Hyleesh's ribs. His throat was dry, his tongue chalky. He rolled over and coughed until it felt like his lungs were turning inside out. Then he closed his eyes and collapsed again.

Warmth awakened him. A pencil of light brushed his face, dust motes dancing in it as though they had a life of their own.

They didn't. Nothing on Yulia had life anymore.

He ran a hand over his cheek and his fingers came back white with dust. He was lying under a slab of concrete that had fallen on a metal cabinet and shielded him from the rubble that had followed. With some labor, he managed to roll to his side. The pencil of light was fanning through a small hole. He grabbed a piece of brick and scooped out dirt until the hole was wide enough for him to crawl through.

The sudden light made him wince. He stood up, dusted off his clothes, and cupped a hand around his eyes.

In broad daylight, his view of what had become of Sunan was dismal.

The city skyline was gone, replaced by dune after dune of rubble.

The wreckage was visible all the way back to the ocean, where a yellow smear of fog draped the horizon. The two buildings he'd flown into had vanished, replaced by the hill he was standing on. Peaks spiked out of the debris here and there, like solitary soldiers left standing in the desert.

He wondered how much radiation still lingered in the dust, how much was getting into his bones, his lungs, his flesh. The sun was harsh on his dry skin. He longed for water, for a shower, for his ship.

His ship.

The thought pumped adrenaline back into his veins. He scrambled down the pile of rubble and back into what was left of a street. He found the jammed rotors of the mosquito on the ground a few feet away, stuck into a lump of twisted and charred metal. There was nothing left to salvage. One thing did grab his attention, though.

Tire tracks. Everywhere.

There was no way to mistake them. At least two feet in width, these were tracks left by the SATVs.

They came looking for me.

How long have I been out?

The sun scorched his eyes, still he craned his neck up, shaded his forehead with his hand, and scrutinized the sky. No white wakes marring the orange-tinted ether, only whiffs of sickly clouds blown away by the wind. Were they gone? They wouldn't have found any trace of Quarium on this shore, Hyleesh was sure of that. But would they have left Yulia completely?

Unlikely.

There were three major oceans on Yulia, all black in color and icy cold—the telltales for Quarium deposits. Zika wasn't going to give up until he'd drilled holes in all the shores on Yulia.

Unless during the testing they'd found his ship, in which case they'd still be at the shore ripping it apart.

Damn it.

He had to get back there fast. He started down the street walled by crumbled slabs of cement when a wave of dizziness caught him. He doubled over, fighting the nausea. He'd gone too many hours—maybe days?—without food or water. His vision blurred. Ghosts of heat swirling up from the debris made him jump.

Just a mirage.

Have to find water. Have to.

He stumbled inside a building. The top floors had shattered, but the ground ones were still standing. Holes gaped where once had been doors and windows.

The reek of rotten flesh negated the respite from the cooking temperature outside. Walls were missing, beams had fallen from the

ceiling and scattered on the ground, together with shoes, torn fabric, and other clothing items—some with their original owners still attached to them.

His brain didn't even register the horror. He moved on automatic, desperately searching for water. He stumbled on broken desks, chairs, torn cables, shattered pieces of electronics, and tripped on a hard object, crushing it under his boots.

An empty plastic bottle.

There was a metal cabinet lying on its side nearby; he opened it. Its contents had been completely pulverized. Bits of broken plastic, electronics, and office supplies—everything had reduced to fine dust. The massive radiation released by the Quarium propulsion bombs had completely wrecked everything, bodies and objects alike.

He banged the cabinet door. It had once contained water bottles and now all there was left was a small plastic cap that quietly rolled to his feet.

Hyleesh sighed.

There has to be something drinkable. Any kind of drinkable.

He waded deeper into the building. The inner rooms were windowless, no ambient light from outside. He dipped a hand in his pocket, fished out a flashlight, and clipped it to his uniform lapel.

Primitive but good enough.

After deserting his own troops, he'd gotten rid of all the electronic paraphernalia that could make him traceable. As much as he missed his flexible-screen SmartComm and all the useful apps it came with, his fellow Yaxees would've already found him and killed him if he still wore one of those around his wrist. He found the bathroom stalls, and for a short moment the unmistakable reek of urine covered the stench of rotten flesh. He tried the sinks, his boots crunching on a layer of mirror shards. Without electricity, the photovoltaic cells that controlled the faucets were useless. He grabbed a broken pipe and banged against the taps until he knocked them all off the wall. Not a single drop of water came out of the pipes.

Hyleesh roared in frustration, thirstier than before. What had he done to himself? He had a good life, captain of one of the best trained corps in the Yaxee army. He was a young promise in his fleet, bound to quickly climb to high military ranks, just like his father...

His father.

His father was a rapist and killer.

Once banned from the galaxy for destroying their mother planet, the Yaxees had become powerful again thanks to Quarium fusion. They rebuilt their military fleet and expanded their domain. Cities on Aplaya flourished and doubled in size. But they wanted more. And when the neighboring planet Yulia threatened to use Quarium too,

panic spread through the Royal Council. Quarium was too powerful to let other planets use it.

Yulia was ruled by anarchists, the land marred by a history of political instability.

Hyleesh's father was one of the members of the Royal Council who'd voted for war. "Three billion people, three major oceans, enough Quarium to destroy the entire planetary system," he'd said in front of His Majesty, the Kraal. "We will attempt to resolve this peacefully by demanding that they surrender the Quarium. If they refuse, they will face the consequences."

The Kraal signed off the Council's decision and gave the order. Zika and his fleet were deployed. The inhabitants of Yulia refused to let the Yaxees land on their beautiful shores. The planet was exterminated.

And now they'll learn that there's no Quarium.

Yulia was too cold for that, too old of a planet. Only Andrameis planets had Quarium, but Yulia was older than Andrameis, older than any other world in the two-star system. The planet had originated from Salis, the smaller star. A handful of academics pointed it out. They were shunned, ridiculed and disbelieved. One was found assassinated inside his home.

Hyleesh's father was a rapist and killer. And now a mass murderer.

When Hyleesh learned the truth, the propulsion bombs were already on their way to Yulia. By the time he made it to Yulia, his ship's instruments didn't detect a single heartbeat on the entire planet. Not a soul had survived the massive extermination.

And now he was going to die of thirst on a brittle dry planet.

He kicked the sink, cursed, and slammed the pipe against the wall. It dented the cement then bounced off the floor with a clang.

The clang echoed.

Hyleesh sighed and dropped his head to his wide palms.

His ship was his only hope. He had to conserve enough energy to get back to his ship.

The clang echoed again. And again.

Hyleesh held his breath.

Echoes don't last that long.

He stormed out of the bathroom and scanned the area with his flashlight. It wasn't an echo. It was a squeak, recurrent, from somewhere down a dark hallway studded with broken beams and fallen furniture.

His lips were parched, his throat so dry it hurt. The last effort in the bathroom had left him drained of energy and dizzy.

Yet the squeak kept calling. There was no air moving, no draft.

Hyleesh held the flashlight like a poised rifle and started down the hallway. All doors had shattered, all rooms looked the same —collapsed ceiling, smashed furniture, wreckage everywhere.

The squeak got louder. Whinier, in a way. More demanding.

You're imagining things. They're all dead. Nobody survived.

He got to the last doorway, the last hole in the wall. He flattened against the wall, an old instinct from his military training, then pointed his flashlight. In the unyielding darkness, two red dots bounced off the light. And they blinked.

Sacred Kraal.

Hyleesh clipped the flashlight back to his jacket and entered the room. It had been a moan, not a squeak. A dog, of all living things, trapped under a slab of concrete that had pinned the poor animal's hind legs. Despite all odds he'd survived. His eyes were crusted with pus, his nose split in the middle and caked with blood. And yet there was still life in him. Hyleesh crouched by his side and the dog barked and licked his hands, his tongue rough and as dry as Hyleesh's own lips.

"I'm not sure what I'm saving you from, buddy," Hyleesh mumbled, clearing the debris accumulated around the animal. "I think right now the chances are slim for both of us."

He lifted one of the beams that had dropped from the ceiling and used it to lever the slab of concrete. As soon as it yielded a few inches from the ground, he kicked a metal shelf underneath to keep it off the dog's legs.

The dog didn't move.

"Come on buddy, you can do this."

Hyleesh pulled gently on his forepaws, dragging him out of the trap, and then assessed the damage. The dog's hind legs were gone, clamped under the weight of the concrete. Ironically, it had also prevented the limbs from bleeding, saving his life. How he'd survived the massive radiation and explosion, though, was a complete mystery.

The dog licked Hyleesh's hand and moaned. Something clinked from his collar—a small, round medal with a plastic keycard attached to it. The medal said"Argos" followed by a call number.

"Argos," Hyleesh said. He patted him behind the ears. "What a trooper."

He removed the keycard from the dog's collar and examined it. It had a magnetic strip and a barcode printed on the back. He stood up and swept his flashlight around. No standing doors left. Whatever the keycard had given access to, it was useless now.

Argos scraped the ground with his front paws and licked the tip of Hyleesh's boot.

Hyleesh stooped down again. "What does this—"

And then he saw it, right as he leaned forward and the beam from his clipped flashlight fell on it—a trapdoor. The concrete slab had fallen on it (and on Argos), hiding it. Hyleesh moved the dog and shone his light on it. The keycard lock had been smashed and the door had caved in.

Hyleesh tried to swallow but his mouth was too dry.

He could still make it to his ship. How far into the city had he come with the mosquito? Maybe in half a day he'd get back to the shore. Maybe he still had it in him, enough energy to make it. But he had to leave now.

Argos let out a soft cry.

Hyleesh nodded. "You have friends down there, don't you?"

His ship's instruments hadn't detected any survivors. But then again, they hadn't detected Argos's heartbeat either.

Hyleesh set the flashlight on the ground, beam pointed underneath the slab of concrete, and removed his jacket. He retrieved the beam, stuck it under the concrete, and then heaved and pushed until the slab inched backward. Satisfied that there was enough room for him to access the trapdoor, he crawled under the slab.

Crushed by the heavy weight, the cardkey pad was jammed. Luckily, the locking mechanism had failed and it took Hyleesh only a little pushing and prodding for the door to yield.

As soon as he pulled it open, the odor wafting out of the door killed his last hope of finding anyone alive. It was so strong it brought tears to his eyes. He took a deep breath, and leaning through the hole, shone the flashlight down below. It was a five-by-five bunker, no more than six feet deep. *A coffin.* The light swept through a rack of shelves brimming with canned food and water bottles that had been miraculously undamaged. He was about to relate the good news to Argos when the light caught something that made him freeze.

A hand.

Hyleesh stuck the butt of the flashlight in his mouth and lowered himself inside the hole. Underneath blue covers, he found a mother and child huddled together against the wall. Their faces were bloated, their skin green and purulent. And yet that gesture—the child embraced by her mother's arms—frozen in the moment of death, carried such tenderness, such humanity, it made Hyleesh rewind back to his own childhood back on Aplaya, back when the world was a big playground and his dad the hero of his dreams. Back when he still believed in his people, his origins, himself. Back before one woman opened his eyes and made his world crumble.

He spotted the air vent above mother and child. He waved a hand in front of it but no air was circulating. They had been spared death by the bombs only to die asphyxiated in the very place that had saved

their lives.

He sighed and dropped the blue cover back over the bodies.

Argos yelped. A slight tremor made the bunker walls vibrate. The cans on the metal rack rattled.

Fuck. The place is going to collapse soon.

Nothing he could do about the mother and child, but Argos, back on ground level, was still alive. *And so am I*, he thought, grabbing as many water bottles as he could hold. He crawled back out of the hole, uncapped the first bottle and poured it in Argos' mouth. The second one he gulped down in huge mouthfuls, splashing the last of it on his dust-caked face. He put the rest of the bottles on his jacket, knotted the sleeves together, and swung it over his shoulder.

He then inhaled, gazed back at Argos, and bobbed his head. "This is going to hurt, buddy," he said, leaning over to pick up the dog. "But believe me, you don't want to be left here either."

Argos yelped as Hyleesh snuggled him against his chest, careful to tuck the stumps of his injured legs underneath. He moaned, then leaned his face against Hyleesh's chest and closed his eyes. For the rest of the hike back out of the building, the dog didn't make another sound.

"Your job is done, buddy," Hyleesh said, patting him. "You didn't save their lives but you saved mine. Your job is done."

* * *

The shore was deserted. Tire tracks and trenches of sand were still visible where the men had set their portable labs to test the water.

Hyleesh set Argos on the sand and uncapped the last bottle of water for the two of them to share. He squinted at the sky, still orange and overcast with smoke from the cliffs. If he was right, Zika had moved his men to the opposite coast, eight thousand miles away. If he was wrong, he and Argos were dead. He swished lukewarm water in his mouth and considered the odds.

Even if Zika and his men were indeed eight thousand miles away, the moment Hyleesh pulled his ship out of her hiding spot, it would take seconds—minutes at most—for the soldiers to pick up the new signal in Yulia's atmosphere.

No chance if they were closer than that, still on this side of the ocean.

On the other hand, sitting here waiting for death to come wasn't going to help much either. He watched Argos's ribcage steadily rise and lower with labored breathing, his auburn coat tight over his bones. The poor thing needed food and medication. Hyleesh's stomach

growled. Hell, he needed food too!

He stuck the empty water bottle in the sand, smacked his lips and said, “Ready to roll, pup?”

Argos flicked an ear but didn’t reply. Hyleesh didn’t think he would, he was just happy to finally have somebody he could talk to. And even without words, the dog’s eyes alone told a million tales.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Hyleesh said, pulling his left boot off. He’d been wearing them for so long, for a moment the mildew smell of his dirty socks covered the fishy stink of the kelp and the bodies rotting on the shore.

“Don’t complain, buddy,” he told Argos. “It’s part of my infallible plan to keep this secret. And unreachable.” He pushed a hand inside the boot and pressed his finger pads against the inner sole. A light blinked to the side of the boot. “Recognition successful,” an electronic voice said. “Initiating request.”

Hyleesh grinned. “That’s how I talk to the Orion. Through my boot. And I have to be close enough, it wouldn’t hear me back there in the city. Short-range radio waves. Primitive, I know, but safe. Had I kept the signal going throughout we wouldn’t be here to tell the story, buddy.”

Argos agreed with a soft bark. He would’ve wagged his tail if he’d still had one. Hyleesh patted him then stared eagerly at the horizon, his jaw tense. It was always a gamble. This exact moment of waiting, of nothing happening and yet about to happen, the notion that something could go wrong and he’d be stranded on a dead planet waiting for his own death.

A black wave swelled, making the horizon curve up. Half a smile tugged at Hyleesh’s lips. And then it happened. The wave burst open and the ship surged out of the sea, streams of water washing down its hull and back into the ocean. She turned her sleek, pointed bow to the shore and lowered her lateral pylons. A small impulse and she was drifting elegantly over the surface of the water.

“Ha!” Hyleesh shouted. “There she is!” He slid his left boot back on, scooped Argos into his arms, and sprang to his feet. “Argos, meet Orion,” he said as the ship glided to shore. “She can be quite stubborn at times, but she’s undoubtedly the most beautiful ship you’ll ever board.”

A flash at the horizon caught his eye, bringing him back to the urgency of the moment. As soon as the ship reached them, he prompted the bridge to lower, jumped, and activated the lift.

“Emergency take off,” Hyleesh shouted, cutting off the AI navigator’s automated greeting. He set Argos in the cot closest the cockpit, hastily promised to take care of his wounds once out in space, and then slumped in the pilot’s seat. “We have exactly eight minutes

to leave Yulia's atmosphere unharmed." He engaged the drive and flipped it to max. "I want you to reach flank speed in sixty seconds," he told the navigator.

"This will cause a significant use of fuel and—"

"Just do it!"

"Yes, Captain. Calculating fastest route..."

The 3D rendition of the surface of Yulia assembled itself over the dashboard. A sound blared and a red dot started flashing behind the ship's avatar inside the hologram.

"A tracker," Hyleesh said. A metal shell equipped with tracking software installed and designed to explode once it reached its destination. "Damn it. How fast is it moving?"

"Approaching the sound barrier," the navigator replied.

"Then be faster!" Hyleesh snapped. He grabbed the helm and slewed the ship around. The red dot on the screen replicated the Orion's movements almost to the inch. The navigator calculated the new route.

"Keep it second guessing our direction until we have a better plan," he told the navigator. No chance to lose the sucker, the only way was to destroy it.

Think quickly! Trackers were not only incredibly fast, but they were able to fool self-aiming software, too. As tempting as it was to try the Orion's sophisticated artillery, right now it was more important to use his ammunition wisely.

He pulled up a new screen, rotated the 3D image, and assessed the planet's surface.

"About to break the sound barrier," the navigator warned. "Requesting permission to go over four g's."

"Permission granted," Hyleesh replied. Back in his cot, Argos yelped.

"I'm sorry buddy, hang in there!" Hyleesh called.

The tracker was still at their heels. He had to lose the sucker and get out of Yulia's atmosphere before the signal reached Zika's men.

He spotted something on the 3D screen and tapped it. The image enlarged. "What am I looking at?" he asked, the rattling of the ship under the high g's making his voice shake.

"Haimai volcano," the navigator replied. "Active. Last week's Quarium bombs caused a new eruption."

A new eruption, Hyleesh thought. *Perfect.*

He balled his fists around the helm and pulled, overriding the current route. "That's where we're going." Hyleesh highlighted the coordinates of the volcano's mouth and copied them into the new route.

"New route is discouraged," the navigator protested. "Volcanoes

on Yulia release high concentrations of bromine chloride, which could damage—"

"Override."

The rattling of the cockpit got louder. The ship stopped swerving, locked the route in, and started a nosedive into the volcano's mouth. The tracker closed the gap. It was a bet Hyleesh was willing to make. Those little machines were resilient and virtually indestructible, but they had limits, too.

The bridge windows darkened as they got covered in ashes.

"Pull out of current route in thirty seconds," Hyleesh ordered.

"Calculating," the navigator replied. "In twenty-eight seconds the ship will be too far deep—"

"Override."

He swallowed hard and watched the tracker on the screen, now only a few hundred feet from the stern of the Orion.

Twenty more seconds. Eighteen. Lights started flashing on the console.

"Temperature reaching maximum tolerance," the navigator said. The Orion screeched deep from its engine. "Temperature over maximum tolerance."

Ten seconds. Hyleesh patted the console. *You can do this, baby. I know you can.*

Five.

Four.

The rattling got louder. Then the ship swerved back up, the g's greying Hyleesh's vision. He fought to keep his eyes open, his knuckles white at the controls. The pixels in the 3D screen flickered and for a moment he lost the connection. His eyes strayed back to the bridge windows, tears of condensation etching through the layer of soot.

Then the image came back, the ship's avatar fast shooting out of the volcano's mouth.

"Where's the tracker?" Hyleesh mumbled. He tried to draw a deep breath, his lungs squashed by the pounding g's. He couldn't hear Argos anymore—the dog would've likely passed out by now.

"Tracker not found," the navigator replied. "Metal residues detected around the volcano's mouth."

Hyleesh exhaled a sigh of relief and grinned. "Excellent. There's your tracker. Too dumb to change its course in time." He slowed the acceleration by two g's.

"Hey buddy, how you doing?" he called to Argos. Five more minutes and he'd be able to unstrap from his seat and attend to the poor lad.

"Reroute to outer space," he ordered.

“Request denied.”

“What? Why?”

“Not enough fuel to break Yulia’s gravitational field.”

Hyleesh set the ship back into cruise and slumped in his seat. He could always land and search for fuel on Yulia. With all the stranded ships he’d seen around Sunan’s spaceport he was sure to find one with a still intact tank. But that would take—how much longer? Two hours if he acted quickly. Plenty of time for Zika’s troops to find him.

“New alert detected,” the navigator chimed in, interrupting his train of thought.

“What now?”

He saw it on the screen before the computer replied. He tapped open a new window and selected the Orion’s tail view.

Forget two hours. They were here *now*, already visible on the horizon.

Tinted in orange by the setting sun, a row of five shiny objects glimmered above the clouds.

Stingrays.

Five fast approaching Stingrays and not enough fuel to break out of Yulia’s grav field.

“Damn it.” Hyleesh rapped his fingers on the console and considered his options. A tracker was a piece of cake compared to a fleet of five Stingrays.

“What do you say, Argos?” he called. “Any tricks up your sleeve against Stingrays?”

Dogs don’t have sleeves.

The console bleeped. “Incoming message. Source: YX3RTZ.”

Hyleesh recognized the code. “Play message,” he said.

Zika’s voice came into the cockpit loud and clear. “Why, hello, Captain Weber.” A chuckle. “My men kept saying you were dead. But I knew better. I recognize talent when I see it. Too bad it’s all wasted on you. Sooner or later the rabbit has to come out of his hole. So, what do you say? Shall we settle this argument civilly? The Kraal reassures me it’s your last chance.”

The Kraal, the Royal Commander in Chief. The word must’ve reached Hyleesh’s father too at this point. He wondered what he was thinking, betrayed by his own son.

No. He *betrayed* me. *No turning back now.*

It was the last resort. But he had no other choice.

He pressed a button.

“Recording message,” the computer said.

Hyleesh leaned into the mic. “Charming to hear your voice, General Zika,” he said. “Always puts me in a good mood. Would love to have more time to chat with such a refined being as you are, but

I'm afraid you wouldn't understand half the things I'd have to say. Like, why there cannot be any Quarium on a planet like Yulia. But by now I'm sure you've seen the evidence yourself. Too bad, isn't it? Because you see, you just wasted thirty thousand tons of Quarium to destroy a planet that, alas, has none. And now you're going to have to wait another twelve months before you can make enough pulse propulsion bombs to destroy your next target. That's sort of ironic, isn't it? Well, let me help you out and send some your way."

Hyleesh released the recording button. "Send now."

He gripped the impulse lever and then tapped the weapon console.

"How much recoil do we need to exit the grav field?" he asked.

"Calculating. At our current altitude of sixty thousand feet, the Orion would need an escape velocity of seventy thousand miles per second."

Hyleesh smiled. "That's plenty. Reroute to outer space." He pulled the impulse lever and tapped on his screen. A whir echoed from the back of the ship.

"We are currently en route," the navigator chimed in. "Are you sure you want to open the cargo bay?"

He sent a last look at the images streaming from the tail view. "Positive."

By now Zika would've received his response. The Stingrays were closer, their unmistakable silhouettes framed by a blood red sun.

"Here we go, baby," he said, confirming the last order. "With love from your favorite captain."

The cargo bay door opened. He watched it from the indoor camera, then switched back to the tail view. The missile dropped and then, as soon as its propeller fired, picked up speed and aimed toward the Stingrays.

Hyleesh watched. "Damn, it doesn't have a tracker," he realized. And then a smile surfaced his lips. *It don't need no tracker.*

Sure enough, as soon as the Stingrays saw the incoming object, a row of artillery barrels flipped up along their wide-span wings.

Hyleesh's smile evaporated. "Shit."

He pulled the impulse lever all the way down. He wanted them to fire, he just didn't want to be near by when they did.

"Not enough fuel to—"

"Override!" he yelled, then slumped back and let the acceleration wave do the rest.

The explosion came seconds later.

They shot it, he barely had time to think before the cloud of energy engulfed the ship. The digits on the accelerometer spiked to eight, then ten g's, and after that he barely had the strength to

mumble, “Keep. Trajectory.” Before everything went black.

* * *

A yelp. Then another one. He opened his eyes. The cockpit was bathed in a dim, milky light. Everything was quiet. Except for the yelp.

“Damn!”

He flipped the lights on and checked his coordinates. The 3D screen reassembled above the dashboard. Yulia was but a small dot in a sea of stars.

Outer space. We made it.

Another yelp, quieter this time.

He unbuckled and sprang to his feet.

“Argos!” he called. “I’m coming, my friend!”

The dog was barely moving. Weak, and even thinner than he remembered, but still alive. Hyleesh unlatched the first aid cabinet, grabbed a handful of energy bars and walked back to the cot. He unwrapped the bars and had to feed the first one into Argos’s mouth before the pup recognized them as edible. But once he did, the rest were gone within seconds.

Hyleesh stroked the dog’s auburn coat. “We made it, buddy. Wanna know how? The Yaxees had enough Quarium to make twenty propulsion bombs per year. And they’d just used them all on Yulia.”

All but one.

The one he’d stolen before leaving for Sarai. He’d hoped to get more, enough to limit the damage to the planet, but things hadn’t turned out as planned.

Good thing he had the one, though, securely stored in Orion’s cargo bay, or he would have never gotten away from the Stingrays. His only fear was that the bomb would fly past the Stingrays and fail to detonate until impacted the ground, but the Stingrays had risen to the bait. They shot the missile carrying the bomb, thus triggering the fusion explosion that signed their own death sentence and bestowed enough recoil to propel the Orion back into outer space.

Now he was the most wanted man in the galaxy, with a handsome reward on his head and no troops to command. But he had the ship of his dreams and a companion to travel with. Hyleesh opened the first aid box, tore a pair of latex gloves out of their sterile package and smiled to himself.

He no longer was Captain Weber.

From now on, he was just Hyleesh.

The luckiest man in the galaxy.

Q&A with E.E. Giorgi

E.E. Giorgi is a scientist, a writer, and a photographer. She spends her days analyzing genetic data, her evenings chasing sunsets, and her nights pretending she's somebody else.

Where did you grow up?

I was born in the U.K. but grew up in Tuscany, Italy. As the daughter of a biologist, the highlights of my childhood were collecting toads after the rain, growing newts and tadpoles in the old bathtub outside, and traveling abroad every summer.

Did you study biology in college?

No. I ended up studying math because it was beautiful and perfect. Except one day I realized that "beautiful and perfect" does not apply to real life problems, so now I still do math but I apply it to biology. Which is the coolest thing, because I get to do biology on a

computer instead of in a wet lab.

Do you still live in Tuscany?

No. After I graduated from college, I moved every other year for ten years (twice across continents) before settling in New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment. It's the most beautiful place on Earth. After Tuscany, of course.

What inspired The Quarium Wars?

The inspiration for this short story came while I was writing the first book in a new space opera series. The character of Hyleesh came to me halfway through the story when I realized I needed some backstory for Argos, his companion dog. This also gave me the opportunity to explain some of the political background behind the quest for Quarium, which is a basic element in the series. I'm planning to release the first book, Anarchy, in the fall. Join my newsletter if you would like to be notified the day of the book release, and you will receive a free story as a thank you: http://eegiorgi.thirdscribe.com/newsletter/

What other books have you written?

My genres are mysteries and thrillers, sci-fi, and YA dystopian. You can find all my books here: http://eegiorgi.thirdscribe.com/my-books/

Re/Genesis
by *G. S. Jennsen*

> *"The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion."*
>
> *— Albert Camus*

AMARANTHE

Milky Way, Sector 14C
Phoenix Arx
6142.319
12th Epoch Proper

WHEN YOU'RE AN anarch, dying is the easy part. Completing your mission objective before nulling out? Not always so easy.

"A scan of your credentials does not return a valid result. Present Accepted credentials or be pacified."

The weaponized arm pointed at my chest by the Vigil unit suggested the pacification would not be of the gentle sort. It rarely was.

I brought my hands up from behind my back and stretched them into the air, fingers curled in but giving every indication they were opening in surrender. As the nail of my left index finger reached the center of my palm, I flicked it outward.

The gossamer dampener net unfurled as it sailed through the air to envelop the Vigil unit.

The floating orb began jerking to and fro in the narrow hallway in an attempt to unsnarl itself. I leapt forward and collected the edges of the net in one hand, then wrangled it under some semblance of control until I was able to wrap my arms around the wide, circular frame and brace it against the wall.

It squirmed savagely, but after two tries I found the input port and shoved a spike into it.

"Not this time, Vigil. You don't get me yet."

The unit dropped from my grip to the floor and rolled into the opposite wall.

I'd bought myself twenty minutes.

I stripped off my infiltration suit, shrank it and stuffed it in my kit. The fete-worthy attire which remained looked ridiculous to my mind, but nevertheless appropriate to the venue I'd be visiting. I unbound my hair and began scaling the service duct.

* * *

The galactic core hung in the sky like an ornament placed *just so* to best complement the pavilion. The prodigious light it provided, even here on the verge, filtered through an invisible prism field to cast soft, color-varying rays upon the conveniently reflective flooring.

See how small you are, it whispered.

See how powerful we are, it hummed.

In this case the core acted as a stand-in for the Anaden Directorate, obviously.

The guests enjoying the Phoenix Arx amenities acted oblivious to the implied message, though in truth it was because most of them had internalized it decades if not centuries ago and would never question it again.

Yet as a backup if the message didn't come through clearly enough—the Directorate didn't practice subtlety—every rotation of the Arx brought them a stunning view of the Phoenix Gateway in the distance. The colossal triple rings gleamed in the unfiltered glow of the galaxy, beautiful and menacing. This close to the ancient structure, the Gateway appeared more massive than the core itself. It was an optical illusion, but an effective one.

Today the Phoenix Gateway numbered only one of hundreds of its kind; in comparison to many of them it was aging, if not decrepit. But there was a reason for that: it was the *first*. The first wormhole portal to span the interstellar void and link to another galaxy. A dwarf galaxy, true, and one long since fallen out of fashion.

But once upon a time the Phoenix Gateway had meant *everything*. This meant it still mattered today, if only as a symbol of all the Directorate had achieved over the millennia.

I noted all this in passing, obscured behind a mask of jaded disdain as I traipsed across the pavilion in a manner which said 'standing in seemingly open space with the galactic core as a backdrop is so very passé. I'm bored already.' I made sure my eyes were vaguely unfocused, since as a member of the Idoni Dynasty I would be presumed by all in attendance to be high on at least one hypna, more likely several. Always, lest the horror of existence come crashing in.

My assigned contact worked the delectables area of the pavilion that stretched the length of the left side. I wove my way through a sea

of patrons, trying to balance the disinterested attitude against the reality that I was on a short timetable.

A virtual overlay in my vision gave me a reference, but I only dared access the overlay in short pulses. On an Arx an unauthorized comm network became perilously susceptible to detection, and detection was guaranteed to bring a merciless punishment.

The Novoloume who the overlay proclaimed was my contact meandered among the crowd dispensing dollops of hypnas onto the tongues and into the eyeballs of buzzing Anaden revelers with a smooth grace which was as mesmerizing as it was expected. Her shimmery pearl skin transformed the light from the core into rainbows, the hues shifting as she did.

I shook my head as minimally as possible in an effort to break out of the reverie before I approached her.

She held the dispenser aloft, ready to provide a dose of synthesized bliss. I started to decline when she placed an elongated, delicate hand on my waist with a sultry smile. Her breath wafted across my ear as she leaned in.

"I know, my dear, but one must maintain appearances. Trust me."

Trust was not something that came easily in my world. But this was *her* world... I offered the tip of my tongue while glaring a fierce warning at her.

The tip of the dispenser touched it, but no further sensation followed. It was empty.

First test passed. I nodded politely. "I'm Eren asi-Idoni."

"You may call me Maeli."

"But it's not your name."

She shrugged faintly as her gaze drifted over my shoulder. "It is as much a name as I allow myself to have. It is the same for you, no?"

"No. Eren asi-Idoni *is* my name."

"Yet the soul behind the name no longer exists, does it?"

I cut my eyes into the crowd, searching for threats. This was all getting far too mystical for my tastes. "Not in the Annals. I'm on a tight schedule here, so—"

"Dance with me." Her hands grasped mine in a display of surprising strength.

"I don't dance."

"All Idoni dance."

"Damn, that must be why I never fit in with them."

She pulled me closer. "There is a Praesidis Inquisitor approaching. *Dance with me.*"

I didn't panic, but I did allow her to sweep me along the smooth pavilion floor as I reviewed my limited options.

I kept a neural layer on tap which allowed me to pass as a proper

Idoni connected to the integral on casual contact with other Idoni Dynasty members. But Praesidis members always saw through the charade. Praesidis Inquisitors, doubly so. And once they did, it was a swift trip to null for me.

The fact I wasn't already dead, however, meant the Inquisitor hadn't come here for me. If I played the part of a... well, a typical Idoni, I stood a chance of escaping notice.

I tried to relax in her embrace and flow with her movements. She was of course correct about the dancing—the natural, innate rhythm was encoded in my genetics. Annoyed, I allowed instinct to take over.

"You have stunning eyes. They are as twin starbursts in the night sky."

I swallowed, feeling heady enough I started to wonder how empty the dispenser had been. "Stop doing that."

"Doing what?" She swept me between two other dancers in a lengthy, dramatic spin.

"That thing you're doing."

"It is not a thing I am doing, Eren asi-Idoni. It is a thing I *am*."

So all the Novoloume insisted. The pheromones they secreted were not *intended* to send most mammalian species into a sexual froth; in fact, they had no knowledge of such an effect until they encountered those species.

I'd insist as strongly it was a lie they professed to hide the nature of their blatant manipulation of others, except the talent hadn't gained them any greater freedom than the other species were permitted. Still, it was no wonder they had been decreed an Accepted Species in record time following contact. Rumor had it the Idoni Primor kept a stable of twenty Novoloume as pets.

I wasn't immune to her beauty, both real and sense-induced—the Novoloume, regardless of gender, were among the most lovely sapient creatures living. I was nonetheless able to resist the mesmeric aspects of her presence, but the act of resisting was itself distracting. I tried to focus my thoughts on other, more relevant matters.

"Is the Inquisitor gone yet?"

She smiled blithely. The core spun around us, or us around the core. "Nearly. He is currently disposing of a troublesome Ch'mshak."

That sounded like a show worthy of observing, but I didn't dare cast my gaze toward it. "Successfully?"

"If bloodily." Her attention flitted to the left then back to me, and her tone remained studiously casual. "You are the first Anaden anarch I've worked with."

"There aren't so many of us. It's not an easy task, breaking away from the integral."

"I can imagine."

“You really can’t.”

Her chin dipped. “As you say. The Inquisitor has departed the pavilion.”

“Good.” I grasped one of her hands firmly and dropped the other. “I’m in a bit of a rush. I was told you could get me into the maintenance channel, so make that happen.”

“As you wish.” Her manner became purposeful but no less graceful as she guided me past the crowd to the staff area and onward to the rear wall. A server unit dawdled above a cylindrical tunnel, and Maeli indicated for me to wait.

When it vacated, she gestured to the tunnel. I peered down it to get an idea of what awaited us.

It was tailored for product delivery, not personal travel, and it held no transport implement.

I raised a questioning eyebrow at my escort. “You know how to do this?”

She nodded.

“Then, after you.” No way was I plunging into the unknown shadowy depths and leaving her standing up here surrounded by every creature comfort, where she might decide the trip wasn’t worth taking.

A flash of defiance sparked in her magenta irises as she leapt into the shaft. *3… 2… 1…* and I followed.

Falling.

The towering Arx had a thousand levels. I suspected I’d be doing so for a while. The snug, curving walls whooshed by in silence, unmarked and unrelenting. They threatened to become as suffocating as the Idoni integral had been.

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the mission details.

The ways in which the mission could fail were legion.

A thruster suit was impossible to smuggle onto the Arx. A stealth, external breach by vessel ipso facto failed due to strict security protocols. An antimatter-tipped long-range missile, in the improbable event it penetrated said security, stood to cause significant damage, but not enough. Multiple distributed detonations were required, and follow-up missiles would doubtless be intercepted.

Turning a ship into an antimatter bomb was arguably viable in theory but an absurd risk in practice. The amount of antimatter needed to be stored on the ship in order for the reaction to reach the target when the vessel ignited was so large it created a sixty-eight percent chance of blowing early.

The solution—or the best solution my superiors had concocted—was a solitary incursion via the channel the maintenance and repair drones used to access the structure. It stretched the three megameters

from the Arx in a series of magnetized coils which propelled objects traveling within them forward through space.

It wasn't as fast as a thruster suit, but I would ride the stream to its destination, just like the drones did.

I chuckled quietly, though the analogy to the Anaden drones above, to when I'd been little more than a drone myself, was too evident to bother enunciating.

The increased resistance against the soles of my feet manifested a bare second before my descent slowed to an abrupt halt. The braking mechanism was designed for less squishy objects than organic limbs.

I landed on the floor with a jarring thud... and found Maeli waiting on me stoically, the swirls of her lustrous robe unruffled and in their befitting place.

It ought not to come as a surprise to me that this, too, was a skill the Novoloume had perfected.

Well, *one* of us no longer felt obliged to project an expected appearance for onlookers. I gathered the copper cords of my hair up off my back and secured them, then ditched the majority of the dress attire. Best to wait to don the hazard suit until we reached the channel.

She motioned me forward. "The passageways proceed for some distance. If your time is as limited as you say, we should make haste."

In my life I had an eternity's worth of time—and right now, none at all, so I adopted the haste.

This deep in the bowels of the Arx, everything was mechanized. Not an organic in sight. Better yet, not a Vigil unit in sight, either, for the Directorate had no need to police their shackled and neutered machines.

Let the citizens dance the night away above, secure in their warped caricature of a free existence. Let the machines do the work. Peace and harmony reigns...

...but not unchallenged. Not tonight.

After crossing an expansive assembly floor we took a left down a short, wide corridor ending in a force field. Maeli stopped.

"The maintenance channel begins on the other side."

"Understood." I put my kit on the floor, opened it and retrieved the hazard suit, then began tugging the snug material on.

Once it covered my waist, I eyed her grimly. "The Arx should be far enough away to survive the blast, but if you've got a new locale in mind, it wouldn't hurt to head in that direction close to now."

"I seldom linger in any one location. It will take me a few moments to reach the transport wing and depart, but no longer than it will take you to reach your target." She paused, looking uneasy. "I'm confident in my ability to achieve shelter, but how will you reach a

safe distance before the detonation?"

Suit in place, I re-secured the utility belt on my hips. "I won't."

The silence hung a span too long. "Oh." Another gap of silence. "Is it painful?"

I snapped both ends of the explosives ribbon to the belt. Carefully. "Almost always."

"Then your sacrifices for the cause are even greater than I realized."

"No need to make a scene over it." *Sacrifice* was such an empty word, tossed about by those who weren't engaging in it to make themselves feel better. I did not and would never know Maeli well enough to say if this was her purpose in using it. Didn't really matter either way.

Satisfied the ribbon was secure and not exploding, I gazed up at her. "What else do you have for me?"

"I'm sending you the drones' ID frequency. Broadcast it, and they'll take you for one of their own—unless you bump into one. So... don't."

"Noted. No dancing with the drones."

"Since you don't dance, I trust that will not be a problem."

I laughed for her. These flares of irreverence were probably a clue pointing to why she acted as an anarch. Part of me toyed with wishing I'd get the opportunity to find out more about her reasons... until I remembered I didn't do attachments.

I situated the breather skin over my face and reattached the depleted kit to the belt as well. "Time to do this. Thank you for your help, Maeli. *Nos libertatem somnia.*"

"Nos libertatem somnia, Eren asi-Idoni."

I slowed my respiration rhythm to maximize the effectiveness of the breather skin. Then I stepped through the force field separating the corridor from the entry tube.

Three rapid steps to the exit and I pitched into space toward the Phoenix Gateway.

The channel coils would get me to my destination eventually, but I pulled my arms in and mimicked a missile to help the propulsion system along.

The journey was much like the fall down the service tunnel, excepting the scenery. My deliberate revolutions presented me with views of the Arx, the Gateway, the galactic core and the intergalactic void in turn.

The once imposing Arx profile quickly shrank in the shadow of the mammoth Gateway. Each ring measured a kilometer thick and a hundred meters wide; the rig driving them weighed greater than six teratonnes. It had been built to last, and no conventional weapon an

anarch might procure was capable of destroying it.

But even the strongest creations could not withstand the application of a fundamental law of physics. Matter and antimatter could not exist in the same space, and their collision was going to result in the expulsion of energy on the order of eight hundred petajoules—and perhaps most importantly, the annihilation of the matter/antimatter which triggered it.

Presto, no more Gateway.

The first of the three rings grew large on my horizon as the terminus of the channel neared. Right before I reached it I brought my legs up to hit the outer boundary at full speed, sprint across its breadth and launch off the structure in free flight toward the center loop.

The Gateway activated, heralding an incoming vessel from its twin in the Phoenix dwarf galaxy. The pulsing energy slammed into me, sending me spinning off course. I skidded out of control over the rim of the ring and grasped the edge with fingertips to spare.

Of all the cursed timing.

I adjusted my grip, trying my damnedest not to pant. Oxygen was a mite scarce resource in space, and now that I was out here I had what I had and no more.

"Well, hell." Nobody was apt to notice an Anaden dangling off the side of one of the loops, legs swaying about in open space, right? Maybe I should stay here for a while....

But there existed no room for such luxuries in my life. The morbid irony implied in the notion I considered the act a luxury didn't escape my notice as I hauled myself up over the ledge and stood on the flat surface of the ring to survey matters.

From here, the void to my right loomed as darkly shrouded as the core to my left shone bright. It felt as if I stood on the precipice of not merely a galaxy but existence itself. It was indulgent of me. Also dizzying, but dizzy was not something I needed to be at the moment.

I removed the ribbon of explosive slabs from my belt, careful to orient it in the correct direction so I would place them in the desired order. The protective layer was set to start dissolving as soon as it came into contact with the metal comprising the exterior; therefore I had to start with the slab bearing the thickest layer in order to buy time to position them all.

I detached the first slab from the ribbon, stuck it to the metal at my feet—and ran. Five kilometers to the next target location, and the reaper's clock counting down on me like a shadow nipping at my heels.

The balls of my feet barely hit the surface as I soared from stride to stride. Lacking oxygen, my muscles used my body's stored energy

reserves to fuel my movements. The minimal gravitational effect the power rig generated for the drones kept me from flying off into space, while also allowing me to travel at greatly enhanced speed.

A virtual bullseye marked the next site. The ideal placement and spacing had been worked out in advance by anarch scientists, or engineers, or whoever it was who sat in labs and did those things so people like me could venture outside and... *complete the missions.*

I hardly stopped as I released the slab, not wanting to lose any momentum.

When the clock hit zero I would be dead, but right now I was alive. High on oxygen deprivation, the magnificent view, and the act of running free along the curving arc of an apparatus that warped the fabric of spacetime to sling objects and people 430 kiloparsecs in a frozen, boundless instant. The stars at my back, the universe at my fingertips—

—a drone clambered up the lip of the ring just as my foot hit metal. I tripped hard over it, landed on my ass with a painful *crack* and tumbled across the surface.

The drone landed on top of me before I could move. One of its spindly tool arms sliced through my shoulder as the other poked for my face.

With a groan I kicked at it and skittered away to climb to my feet. Undeterred, the drone sprang toward me.

"Off you go, machine!" I grabbed it with both hands and hurled it over the side into oblivion.

The cut on my shoulder hurt like a bitch, but worse, the swipe had sliced open the thin film of my suit. My dwindling life expectancy had now been cut in half.

But it hadn't damaged my legs, so I ran once again. Two primed slabs still to place.

If I failed, the destruction might not be total. This constituted an unacceptable outcome. To my superiors, but mostly to me. I did not do half-measures, and if I was going to die in an explosion of white hot agony, it was going to be a properly majestic explosion.

One which served as a fitting symbol of how far we were willing to go to dismantle the Directorate superstructure and break its chokehold on not solely us but the entire fucking universe.

The near vacuum of space sucked at the tear in my suit, but I ignored it to sprint. Only a little farther.

That was such a lie.

The light of the core sank above me as the ring bowed in to the void. The marker for the next-to-last location blinked urgently at me, and I readied the drop—

—and very nearly made a disaster of it. The tiny sips of oxygen I

subsisted on were taking their toll, and when coupled with the pain in my arm and leaking suit, I was now less running and more stumbling forward from sheer inertia.

I tried to drop the slab while moving, slipped and kicked it toward the edge. I lunged for it in panic, overestimated the distance, and fell atop it. *Please don't detonate. Please don't detonate.*

One thing was certain: my weight had succeeded in sticking it to the metal. I crawled to my feet and rested my hands on my thighs. Dizziness—the real kind—blurred the periphery of my vision.

"Why am I doing this?"

The stars had no answer for me, but it was okay. I had my own answer. I would run and I would fly and I would die, but I would not be a slave. Not to the Idoni integral and its sadistic Primor. Not to the Anaden Directorate. Not to my anarch superiors. I wasn't here because they'd ordered me here; I was here to be free.

I ran.

Possibly crookedly.

The journey passed in a blur, and suddenly the final location rushed up on me.

I placed the slab, knowing it had none but the slimmest protective layer, and flung myself off the ring into space.

Time's up.

I twisted around to face the Gateway with a second to spare. A second to witness the staccato of explosions shine more brilliantly than the galactic core as my body atomized to nothingness, until not even stardust remained.

* * *

Milky Way, Sector 59F
Anarch Post Alpha

On the other side of the galaxy, deep in a sector the Directorate had long ago abandoned, I awoke with a gasp.

Sterile smooth walls and cushioned linens welcomed my transition. A fading echo of the flash of agony receded to a memory as I breathed in the oxygen-rich air of the restoration capsule.

My hand went to my shoulder, but of course the wound was gone. My skin felt cool, still moist from the gelatinous fluid it had resided in until needed.

Outside the capsule a Curative unit checked my vitals. A chime signaled all systems were nominal, and the protective cover slid away as the virtual image of my handler materialized.

"Welcome back, Eren. Congratulations on a successful mission.

See to your personals, then report in twenty minutes for a briefing on your next assignment. *Nos libertatem somnia*."

Q&A with G. S. Jennsen

Re/Genesis features a fantastical, far-future world very different from our own. Where did the story come from, and how does it relate to your other works?

This is the first time I've ventured into far-future territory in my writing, but it won't be the last. When I wrote the story, I was just starting work on the final trilogy in my *Aurora Rhapsody* series, *Aurora Resonant*, which is going to take place almost entirely in the world of *Re/Genesis*. The main characters in *Aurora Rhapsody* have known for several books now that another universe—the 'true' universe, as it were—exists alongside our own, but *Re/Genesis* is the first real look anyone's gotten at it.

This story started out as a sort of test run, a chance for me to dip my toe into the waters of the worldbuilding I was going to have to do for the next trilogy. But I quickly fell in love with the character of

Eren and completely embraced the story, setting and all. It got me legitimately excited to dive into writing *Aurora Resonant*.

Who are your favorite fictional heroes and villains?

I'm an avid video gamer (though I have little time to play since I began writing full time), so I'd have to say my favorite fictional hero is Commander Shepard from the Mass Effect video game trilogy. Favorite villain? Probably the motiles from Peter F. Hamilton's Pandora Star/Judas Unchained space opera novels. He wrote a number of chapters from their perspective, and their way of thinking, their worldview, their entire essence was so foreign and, well, alien. It was fascinating.

Where did your love of SF begin, and what authors have inspired you?

I've been reading science fiction since I was a kid. In the old days, I loved Isaac Asimov for the sweeping space exploration and fantastical future, and Frank Herbert for the deep world- and culture-building. Later, Catherine Asaro for daring to mix serious, hard science fiction with romance and Lois McMaster Bujold for daring to have fun with science fiction. William Gibson for painting masterful imagery with mere words and Peter F. Hamilton for telling vast, grand stories.

Any Works in Progress?

Always. *Aurora Renegades: The Complete Collection*, will be released in the fall; it will include all three *Aurora Renegades* novels and the *Apogee* short story, plus some bonus content. I'm now deep into writing *Relativity: Aurora Resonant Book One*. No release date yet, but I'm targeting December 2016. If anyone wants to know more about *Aurora Rhapsody*, they can visit gsjennsen.com, or go directly to gsjennsen.com/aurora-rhapsody.

How can fans find you or follow you?

I love hearing from my readers. Seriously. They can email me at gs@gsjennsen.com; I'm active on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, but I'm also on all the other social media networks (I'm easy to find —just try "GS Jennsen"). If someone wants to guarantee they'll find out about new releases, though, the best way is to subscribe to my mailing list.

Second Place
by *Nick Webb*

November 5th, 2067

Sweetie, before I answer your question, just keep in mind who the hell I am. I'm the second goddamned human to set foot on Mars. THE SECOND. And more people are moving there every day. Here, I'm nothing. Some nameless retiree in some nameless godforsaken suburb of Dallas. There, I'd be a goddamned prophet or something. Like Adam. Or, uh, Columbus, except less, you know, genocidal.

FRANK BICKHAM, SECOND human to set foot on Mars, punched the 'send' key a little too aggressively, accidentally hitting delete instead.

"Aw... sh—" he began, before looking over his shoulder to see if the great-grandkids could hear. Sure enough, the littlest was peering up at him with her wide six-year-old eyes. "—amwow," he finished.

"Don't you mean shit?"

He spun around to face her. "Samantha! Don't say that! Who the hell taught you to say that?"

"Grumpy," she said, laughing, pointing at him.

Frank sighed. "Grumpy," he repeated. The computer behind him chimed. Another message from his granddaughter, probably wondering why he hadn't responded yet. When the hell was she going to pick up these rugrats, anyway? He tousled Samantha's hair playfully.

She grimaced, and in a solemn six-year-old voice said, "Stop, Grumpy. I'm having a bad hair day."

What six-year-old has a bad hair day? "Go," he said, pointing to the other room. "Go be a kid."

Samantha ran off, giggling, and Frank strained to read the new message before cursing again and ramming his reading glasses onto his nose.

So are you going to answer the question, Grumpy? Or just start ignoring me again?

He punched out the previous message he'd erased as best he could remember and fired it off, before switching to his other message feed from the pencil pushers over at Interplanetary Reserve Inc. Nothing new yet. Dammit.

Another chime. Her reply was just a terse, *Call me.*

"Shit," he said again, yanking the glasses off and rubbing the bridge of his nose. He didn't have time for another long conversation with his granddaughter, convincing her why he needed to go to Mars. To go there for good. She had a husband, for god's sake, she didn't need old Grumpy around to watch the kids. Why the hell was she clinging on to him? "Aw, hell. Fine. You want me to call you? Let's talk, sweetie."

Before he could even pick up the phone, the computer chimed again, this time from the other feed. It was Interplanetary. He punched over, his hand shaking ever so slightly. Parkinson's? The doc assured him it was under control. Naw, just nervous. Ha. Frank Bickham, second man on Mars, nervous about what a bunch of good for nothing pencil pushers would say.

> *Mr. Bickham,*
> *Pursuant to our conversation on 10/29/67, your status as Mariner Valley colony member #10,257 is approved. Attached, please find the orientation packet and final paperwork that must be completed by….*

He stopped, and began again, rereading to make sure he wasn't imaging it. A thrilling jolt ran up his spine.

It happened.

He'd done it. Well, almost. One last step remained, but for all intents and purposes, barring any unforeseen unfortunate events, it was going to happen.

Frank Bickham, second man on Mars, was going to be the first man to die on Mars.

Switching over to a third feed, he fired off a message he'd composed months ago, to his rival, Jerry Su, first man on Mars.

> *Suck it, Su. I won.*
> *Signed,*
>
> *Frank Bickham, first man to die on Mars.*

And he grinned.

Six months later

Frank looked up from his datapad, thinking the approaching person was his new friend, but no, just another passerby. In Dallas, when random people walked by his table outside the cafe, they

wouldn't even make eye contact. Who cares about some cranky old bastard having his morning coffee? But here, on the main plastic boulevard under the clear composite glass of Huygens dome in Mariner Valley on Mars, he was a goddamned celebrity. Shit, even the street was named after him. Bickam Boulevard. They spelled his name wrong on the sign, but he could look past little details like that. Better than drinking a cup over on ass-ugly Su Avenue. In a few months, he'd be frickin' immortal. First man to die on Mars. Bam. They'd rename the whole godforsaken valley after *that* shit.

The approaching woman kept glancing at him surreptitiously, looking like she was taking great pains to *not* look like she was looking at him, but by the time she passed his table she dropped all pretense.

"Are you...?"

He smiled his strained, fake 'for the adoring masses smile'.

"The one and only."

She looked young. Well, probably in her late forties. Young enough for him to not be overly concerned for her health, thank god. And therefore, not worth his time. "Charmed," he said, accepting her handshake. Briefly. He had work to do—no time to schmooze with his fans.

She held on to his hand a split second too long. "Ma'am?" he began, before she pulled the hand away, looking mortified. "I'm terribly busy. But so very good to meet you."

She looked mortified, chagrined, and flustered all at once. "Oh! And, uh, you too! We're so proud to have you up here with us. Or down here. Or... here. You know. Mars. Huygens Dome. Su Avenue."

"Bickam Boulevard, actually. Yes, yes, I know, thank you," he said, smiling his strained smile. He spied an elderly man shuffling down the boulevard towards them. Ah. His new friend. "If you'll excuse me, Mrs....?"

"Martinez. Jackie Martinez. I'm an environmental engineer working on CO2 filtration and sequestration over in satellite pod ten. I don't get over here to the main strip very often—I haven't had a good cup in coffee in *forever*. How's this place? I keep meaning to try it, but I'm always so rushed when I come over here, you know, what with work and all, but it certainly looks like a decent coffee shop. You come here often? Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm rambling. Sorry. I'll be going. So nice to meet you, Mr. Su!"

"Bickham!" he called after her. Once she was gone, he stretched his cheeks and lips. "God, that hurts." He'd held his 'for the masses smile' the entire time, which tended to strain his face. He stood up to greet the elderly man who'd finally made it to the coffee shop. Bickam Boulevard in Huygens dome wasn't that long—just under a kilometer,

but his new friend looked like he'd just completed a fifty kilometer hike.

That didn't bode well.

"Mr. Smith? Very pleased to meet you. Frank Bickham." He extended a hand.

"Mr. Bickham! A pleasure!" Smith's handshake felt weak. Damn. Another bad sign.

Frank waved him to a chair at his table on the narrow, plastic composite sidewalk. "Have a seat. Can I order you something? Coffee? Orange juice? Quinoa extract? Something healthy?"

Smith waved him off. "Just had breakfast, thank you."

"Good. Best meal of the day. Very healthy habit. Good, good," mumbled Frank.

Smith nodded and glanced up at the monitor hanging from the roof of the boulevard, gaudily flashing the news and analysis as delivered by some loud-mouthed talking heads and competing news ticker streams. Luckily, it was muted. Smith pointed up at the screen. "Can't get enough of us back on Earth, can they? We're celebrities. If only they knew what it was *really* like up here. All work, no play, no booze, no women. At least, none for me. Who the hell wants to get in the sack with a eighty-year-old man?"

Frank laughed gruffly. "Tell me about it," before adding, tentatively, "so, you drank a lot before you got here?"

"A lot? Well, no, I wouldn't say that. Just a beer or two after a day's work. Welder," he added, tapping his chest. "After a day of gluing aluminum prefab modules together, a man needs a cold one, you know what I mean? But do they think about us? Nope. Just their goddamned bottom line. That's Interplanetary for you. Profit margins and stock prices. They're up, the colony's a success. They're down, and we're all horseshit, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, you said it, brother." Frank nodded, watching the monitor switch over from Earth's CNN feed to a locally produced news program. Hell, they even brought an anchorwoman up here. They were talking frantically about something, with earnest expressions. Probably the stock price. "Say, Ed—can I call you Ed? You getting good exercise?" He noticed the other man's raised eyebrows. "Just wondering, you know." He tapped his datapad. "For the job. You know they sent me up here to be a community health analyst, or whatever bullshit they want me to do. Honestly, I'm just here for the low gravity. Good for the joints. Arthritis sucks, man."

Smith chuckled. "Yeah, ain't that the truth."

Frank nodded. "So? Exercise? Generally feeling pretty good? No major health issues?"

Smith looked mildly flabbergasted. "Well, I—"

His datapad chimed. A message from Earth, probably Samantha—the little girl must send him five video messages a week. Sometimes five a day. Earth was still close to inferior conjunction with Mars so the delay was only five minutes or so. God—he loved that little girl. He was half tempted at times to scrap the whole plan, just to have a few more years hosting tea parties with her and her stuffed fluffy friends. But no turning back now.

He tapped the pad. It wasn't from Samantha, but a note from her mom, Ramona, his granddaughter.

> *Grumpy, have you seen the news? Is it as bad as it looks? I hope you're ok.*
>
> *-Ramona*

The news? Smith was still talking, and Frank raised a hand to quiet him, while simultaneously waving at the monitor hanging from the transparent composite ceiling. "Volume up," he said.

"—ently unknown how many casualties we're looking at here. Reported injuries are ranging from minor to severe, and several colonists are still unaccounted for. Colonial engineering operations chief Cena said just a few minutes ago that the affected area inside habitation module twelve has been fully vented and now has a stable atmosphere, and first responders will soon be able to—"

Frank bolted out of his seat and started running down the boulevard. He heard a grunt behind him, and saw to his chagrin that Smith was trying to follow. "I'm coming! I can help! You're right, I need the exercise anyway—" He cut off as he stumbled stepping from sidewalk to street.

Shit—the man was probably going to have a heart attack from the effort. Frank waved him off. "Stay. I'll handle this. You go... eat a carrot, or something."

Seven minutes later

Frank was out of breath when he arrived at the entrance to habitation module twelve, and if not for the adrenaline surge he'd have collapsed in a puddle of sweat, leg cramps, and geriatric back spasms. The scene was utter mayhem, with the colony's emergency team, medical staff, engineers, and even volunteers rushing around, frantically carrying victims out of the habitation module, working on emergency equipment or tending to wounded people lying on the ground.

In a moment of panic, he tentatively approached a blanket-draped

figure lying prone nearby. The thick cloth covered the entire body, head and all, and Frank felt the confusing chorus of emotion that alternated between grief for the victim underneath, and rage that he'd missed his chance. Dammit! He'd waited too long. He'd dithered and puttered and postponed his plan for weeks, and now it was too late. Someone *else* would be the first man to die on Mars. He half-hoped it was that smug self-righteous Su, before he remembered the first man on Mars wasn't slated to arrive for another six months, at least.

He crouched down and, slowly, mournfully—for himself and for the stranger—rested a hand on the blanket-covered head.

"Agh!"

His heart jumped up into his throat and he yanked his hand away from the blanket, which flew off the head as the woman underneath brushed it away in a fit. "You scared the shit out of me!"

He grimaced. "Sorry! I'm so sorry, I thought... well, I thought—"

Her face changed, and he recognized the look. The look of an expression changing from 'who the hell is this angry old bastard' to 'Oh my god, it's Frank Bickham.' "Mr. Bickham! I'm sorry I snapped. I'm just in a daze. Very tired. Very..." She started crying.

Looking up at the frantic scene all around him—first responders were just now carrying another dazed, bloody victim from the smoking entrance to the habitation module—he realized he'd be next to useless in the actual emergency response, so he knelt down and reached for the woman's hand. "No, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have startled you. Are you hurt? Can I help you?"

"Just frightened," she managed to choke out in between heaving sobs. "I—i—it was so horrible!"

"It'll be all right," he said, stroking her hand, wanting to believe his own words. Please be all right. Please don't die. Nobody die. That's my job. You people better not mess this up for me...

He lost track of how long he knelt there with the woman, but eventually a medic stood over them both. "Mr. Bickham? Thank you so much for your assistance. Mrs. Doughby here was just in shock. We'll take her into the medical center now, but I expect she'll be just fine."

Frank tried to keep his expression neutral, but concerned. "How is everyone else? Any casualties? Everyone alive?"

The question seemed to hang in the air for an eternity. Answer the damn question, man!

"Miraculously, everyone is alive. A few are in serious condition, and one in critical, but we're hoping for the best."

Frank struggled to suppress his glee, doing his best 'concerned old guy' look. "Please let me know how I can help. Consider me at your disposal."

“Is that Frank Bickham?” said a loud voice nearby. To his chagrin, someone holding a large news camera swiveled his way, and the same anchorwoman he’d seen on TV earlier rushed over, cameraman in tow. “Mr. Bickham!”

“He’s been sitting with Mrs. Doughby here, soothing her,” said the medic.

The anchorwoman beamed at him. “Oh! Of course!” She turned to the camera. “Scarlet Paredes here with our own Mr. Frank Bickham, resident hero, and, if I may say so, an inspiration to us all. I’ve just been informed that Mr. Bickham responded immediately to the incident, and has been sitting here with a wounded colony member for the past hour,” she glanced down at his hand, still holding the trembling Mrs. Doughby’s, “consoling her in what must have been a chaotic and unthinkable situation. Mr. Bickham? Do you have something to say to our fellow Martians?”

He was speechless. “Ah…” he began.

Mrs. Doughby filled in for him. “He’s my knight in shining armor! He could be sitting comfortably in his penthouse over in Huygens, but instead he knelt here and s—s—stroked my hand until I stopped crying. G—g—god bless you, Mr. Bickham!” she said through sniffs and tremblings.

Oh, god.

Six days after that

The medal ceremony seemed to take for frickin’ ever, and Frank thought it was in poor taste, since there were people still being treated for their injuries at the medical center. But Governor Ladro had insisted, and blathered on for what must have been for over an hour about the heroics and compassion of Mr. Frank Bickham, *Martian Citizen Number One*—according to the inscription on the medal—before hastily adding thanks to the rest of the emergency responders, who all sat in the first row gazing up adoringly at Frank sitting next to the governor at the podium.

That was earlier in the day—making him miss his morning coffee on Bickam Boulevard, dammit—and now he was back at the bedside of the youngest victim of the blast, Wixam Hanuman, age six. Exactly the same age as little Samantha. “Did you miss me?” he said, leaning over from the bedside chair, waggling his ears—Wixam always laughed hysterically when he did that.

“You were here this morning, Grumpy.” The boy’s eyes drifted to the medal hanging against Frank’s chest, and grew wide. “Ooo! Is that for saving Mrs. Doughby?”

“I didn’t save Doughby, kid. She wasn’t even hurt.” He handled the medal and fingered the inscription. Martian Citizen Number One. “No idea why they gave me this sh...” He trailed off, catching his profanity.

“Shit?”

“What? Uh ... no! Shamwow!”

Wixam eyed him skeptically. “Grumpy, that’s not a word.”

“What the hell do you know? You’re six.” He lazily traced the ‘Number One’ on the medal with a finger, the phrase reminding him that if he was going to be successful, if he was going to win the race, he needed to act soon. Very soon. All the survivors of the blast were doing very, very well—even Wixam, who’d developed a few mysterious complications the day after the accident, was looking like he’d be just fine. But he couldn’t afford to wait any longer. The next accident might be worse. Or there was Ed Smith. The man claimed he was in perfect health, but looked more frail by the day. The old welder might just keel over and buy the farm the next time he tripped on the sidewalk. And where would that put Frank’s meticulous plan? Tits up. That’s where.

“You shouldn’t swear around a six-year-old, Grumpy.”

Frank let the medal drop to his chest and grinned a lopsided smile. “You said ‘shit’ first. I only said ‘hell.’”

“Hell’s bad too,” Wixam said earnestly.

“It’s in the bible. It can’t be bad.” Before the kid could respond, Frank reached over to his chart and perused it, nodding approvingly. Any other person would be kicked out of the hospital for looking over the chart of a non-relative, but he was Frank frickin’ Bickham. “Looking good here, kid. I bet they’ll get you out of here later today. Tomorrow, tops.” He set the chart down. “Where are your parents, anyway?”

Wixam shrugged. “Getting sissy from school,” he said, probably referring to his sister.

“Good, then they’ll be here any minute—school’s only a block away.” Frank stood up, and formally extended a hand. “Mr. Hanuman, it’s been a pleasure.”

“Bye, Grumpy.” Frank turned to leave, but Wixam added, “You know, you’re not really grumpy.”

Frank turned back, raising an eyebrow. “What did you say?”

“You’re not really grumpy.”

“All my grandkids and great-grandkids call me Grumpy. It’s my nickname. Don’t you like it?”

“You’re just pretending to be grumpy. I can tell.”

Frank had no response to this, so he frowned, and gave a small mock-salute. “Catch you later, kid.”

The walk back to Huygens Dome would only take ten minutes, and he didn't need to be anywhere until his noon meeting with the city council and the corporate board, so he decided to head to the emergency airlock just outside the city park. The site of his plan's impending execution. The place he'd find his way into the history books. Second man on Mars? Screw that. First man to die on Mars, coming right up, baby.

Only a few people strolled the green park grounds under the huge transparent dome of the city park. Red light filtered down through the foliage from the inhospitable paper-thin atmosphere beyond the composite glass. The atmosphere that would kill him. The atmosphere that he'd be hailed as a hero for saving the population from.

Once inside the emergency airlock, he checked the automatic visitor log. Sure enough, no one had been there since the last time he'd checked his handiwork. No one would have noticed the imperfection in the inner airlock's door, which would surely cause a major spark when shut in an emergency. No one would have noticed the constant background drain on the outer airlock door's battery, which, inexplicably, was not connected to the central computer —Interplanetary's singular focus on the stock price knew no bounds, apparently. And no one would have noticed the fact that the oxygen line over in the corner was clogged. And several other pieces of the Rube Goldberg-esque series of technical problems that would culminate in the appearance of the colony being put at grave threat of catastrophe, and his own death as he sacrificed himself to save them all.

It would be glorious.

And by all accounts, quite painless, given that the near vacuum would put him to sleep far sooner than it would kill him.

He double checked his handiwork before exiting the room, being sure to use his special security access to erase the record of his visit. The perks of being a hero—they trusted him with top secret security clearance and all-system access.

Lunchtime was approaching fast and he hurried to Huygens Dome, but a glance at his watch told him he still had twenty minutes to burn before the meeting. According to the street sign he was just a block from Ed Smith's apartment, and so he decided to make an unscheduled visit—the unannounced kind, where the visitor peers in through the window from under a bush rather than take the more obvious route of knocking on the door.

Before long he found himself on the flimsy plastic sidewalk staring up at the apartment building. Luckily, it was surrounded by bushes, and Ed's unit was on the ground floor, so with a surreptitious glance to either side he wandered around the side of the building, and

assuring himself no one was watching, plunged into a hydrangea bush under what he supposed was Ed's kitchen window.

"—told you, Marie, there's nothing to be done about it. Look, sweetie, yes, I could come back to Earth and have the operation. But what would it get me? Three more years? Five? And if a new aortic valve lasts twenty more years, it'll be the diabetes that gets me. And if that doesn't, the prostate. We talked about this before I left, and I thought we understood that I was mortal, and I was old, and that this was a one-way trip. Plus, I signed the contract. No one leaves unless congress approves a spending authorization to shuttle someone back, and that ain't happening for some eighty-year-old welder who—"

Frank yelped and almost jumped as his pocket started chirping with an incoming call. He breathed a curse, jabbing it through the cloth of his pants to silence it.

"—hold on, sweetie..." Frank could hear the other man in the kitchen stand up from his chair with a labored grunt, and approach the window. He squeezed up against the siding underneath as best he could and held his breath. A creak from above told him the old man was leaning against the windowsill. Labored breathing filtered down through the leaves of the hydrangea.

"Move along, nothing to see here," mouthed Frank.

"Sorry, Sweetie, thought I heard something out the window. Probably one of the feral squirrels we've got around here. Now, as I was saying—"

Frank crawled away military-style, and once he'd passed another unit's window he stood up.

"Frank Bickham?"

He recognized the voice. His face was turned away from her, so he allowed himself a grimace. "Mrs. Doughby?" He turned to face her. She was leaning out her window. Did she really live right next to Ed Smith? Shit. Just his luck.

"Mr. Bickham!" she said again, excitedly, grinning from ear to ear. "What are you doing here?"

"Uh, just checking on you, my dear. To see if you were doing ok after your terrible ordeal."

She covered her mouth with her hands, looking as if she was about to cry. "So thoughtful! What a wonderful man you are!" She paused. "Through the window?"

"I... uh..." he stammered, searching for words. "Yes. Through the window. Didn't want to bother you."

The awkward conversation took far longer to extricate himself from than he would have liked, and he half suspected that the house call would make it onto Scarlet Paredes' evening news broadcast as another heroic example of Frank Bickham's care for the common man,

or ferret-faced woman in this instance. But he finally made it the last few blocks to his lunch meeting, worrying the entire time about Ed Smith's message to his daughter, or whoever Marie was.

The man needed an aortic valve replacement. Frank was no doctor, but it sounded terminal. And by the time he was shaking hands with the corporate board and the city council, he'd made his decision.

Tonight was one for the history books.

Later that evening

The preparations were made. He'd rechecked the Rube-Goldberg sequence of planned systems failures in the auxiliary airlock that would result in the appearance of the colony being placed at grave risk and result in his heroic death.

He'd had a close one. Habitation module twelve—the site of the explosion and decompression last week—was still leaking a minute amount of atmosphere that the engineering team couldn't lock down, and it led to him nearly being discovered at the auxiliary airlock during the team's extra safety walkdowns of the rest of the colony. But he managed to slip out just in time, and when he returned later, none of his preparations had been disturbed.

And now he was sitting in his usual chair at the cafe on Bickam Boulevard, enjoying his last cup of coffee.

It tasted like victory.

He typed the final few lines of one of the last messages he'd write.

> *Anyway, Su, it really is great up here. But I have some unhappy news for you. I've been feeling ill lately. Not sure how long I'll last. Could be years. Could be days. Just thought you'd like to know.*
>
> *Signed,*
>
> *Frank Bickham, First Man to Die on Mars, baby.*

He tapped *send*, glanced up at the TV monitor hanging nearby. Scarlet Paredes was talking earnestly into the camera with a grave expression on her face. Hell, what now?

Before he could turn the volume up, his hand device started beeping with an incoming call. The screen showed Doctor Pratt's face —the medical center's chief.

"Frank," he said, tapping the line open.

"Mr. Bickham, I'm afraid we have terrible news."

Oh. Shit. He was too late.

He was too late.

Ed Smith must have gravely overestimated how much time he had left. And Frank had fiddled and twiddled and now...

He'd lost. The second man on Mars would always just be that. The Second.

"Yes?" he said, tentatively.

"You know the boy? Wixam Hanuman? He's taken a turn for the worse."

Frank jumped up with a start. "Wix? What's wrong?"

"The injuries he sustained are healing, but they've revealed an underlying condition that has now been aggravated by what he's been through. Long story short, he's in desperate need of a blood transfusion."

"Damn," he said, shaking his head. "I'm so sorry. I'll be by to visit him in the morning, if that's ok. Please tell his parents that if there's anything I can do—"

"Actually, there is something you can do, Mr. Bickham. It turns out that our Wixam has a very rare blood type, rendering all our blood stores we have on hand useless for him."

Shit.

"And...?" he asked, tentatively, though he knew, and feared, the answer.

"*And* it turns out that the only other person with that blood type on Mars is a Mr. Frank Bickham. I'm afraid that Wix doesn't have the three months it will take the next shipment to arrive from Earth. He needs the transfusion, Frank, and he needs it now."

Shit.

But there was no internal debate. The response was automatic. "I'll be there in five minutes."

He tapped the channel closed, and collapsed back into his chair.

Shit.

Poor Wix. He'd only known the boy for a few days, but he'd visited with him for hours already. He was another one of his great-grandkids now. Like Samantha.

The history books would have to wait. And he might have to put a twenty-four hour watch on Ed Smith. Possibly put him on precautionary life-support. He could arrange for that, right? He was Frank frickin' Bickham.

His handset beeped again, indicating an incoming message. It was from Su. He'd received Frank's message and must have immediately fired off a reply.

> *Bickham. Great news. My status as Mariner Valley colony member #10,451 is approved. See you soon!*

Etcetera? That was a shot across his bow. Su was taunting him. And he'd be here in three months.

Shit.

Thirty minutes later

The blood transfusion was quick and painless. But the baggy circles under little Wixam's eyes were disconcerting. Frank glanced nervously from Wix to his parents sitting nearby. His mother, a small, pretty woman, was making a valiant effort to contain her distress, and tousled her boy's hair, forcing a thin smile. His father sat stoically in the corner.

"Are you feeling ok, Grumpy?" said the boy.

"Me? You're asking *me* if I'm feeling ok? You're the one in the hospital bed, kid. Have you looked in a mirror lately?" he said with a good-natured smile. He'd gotten the impression early on from little Wix that he was the type of kid that appreciated a gentle ribbing, and his giggle confirmed it.

"They said I'll need your blood for a long time."

"Yeah, well, let's not think about that. I'm sure they'll come up with a way to fix you good. You'll be healthier than I am within a few days, and I'm as healthy as they come."

Wixam nodded solemnly. "I thought maybe, instead of coming to the hospital for more transfusions, I thought maybe we could stuff you into my backpack and just hook up a tube between us."

His father looked mortified. His mother's jaw hung half-open.

Frank laughed. "You got it, kid. If you can carry me, I'm all yours. Your own personal blood bank, on tap at all hours of the day. Just save a few pints for me, wouldya?"

They continued their banter, and before long little Wix's eyes got droopy and he fell asleep. Frank glanced from one parent to the other. They both looked like they hadn't slept in days.

"Mr. Bickham, thank you so much for doing this. I have no words..." the mother trailed off.

The father nodded. "I don't know what we would have done if you weren't here. If there's ever anything you need, anything at all, please let me know. My father is the vice president of Interplanetary —just one word from me and it happens. Whatever you want."

A wicked thought crossed his mind. "Can you revoke Jerry Su's colonist application?"

"What?"

“Just kidding,” Frank said with a wry chuckle.

The father laughed nervously, and yawned. Damn, these people needed sleep.

Frank tapped a finger on his armrest. “I know what you could do for me.”

“Name it.”

“Go to bed. Both you and your wife. Get some sleep—I’ll be here all night.”

They both stared at him.

“No, I mean it. He needs you,” he said, pointing at the sleeping boy, “but he needs you to be awake, alert, and healthy. Go to bed. Don’t make me pull rank,” he added, with a grin.

After another round of profuse thanks, they left.

“Just you and me, kid. And I’ll be damned if you leave before I do.”

An hour passed, and he was dozing off when something jolted him awake.

“Mr. Bickham?”

Dr. Pratt was looking at him through the half-opened door.

“Yes, Doctor?” he croaked.

“Would you mind coming back tomorrow evening? I want to build up a short-term supply of your blood. Just in case... you know.”

Frank nodded. It wasn’t immediately clear to him what *you know* meant, but it didn’t matter. “Very prudent. In fact, how about we build up a long-term supply? I can come in twice a day for the next two weeks or so, if needed. Let’s make sure we have at least a year’s worth, wouldn’t you say? At least until the next shipment comes in from Earth. I assume they’re going to send over a supply of his blood type?”

Doctor Pratt’s face broke out into a huge smile. “Yes, they will. You never cease to amaze me, Mr. Bickham. Yes, that would be perfect. God bless you.”

Pratt left him alone with the boy, and his thoughts.

Two weeks. Build up enough of a supply, make sure that the boy would live a long, happy life, and then Frank Bickham was heading to the history books.

“Grumpy?”

The boy’s small voice made him jump. “Yeah, Wix?”

“Don’t ever go anywhere.”

Dammit. Kid’s not helping. “I’ll be right here, kid. On Mars. Forever.”

“Good.” The kid’s voice sounded remote and slurred, as if he was sleep-speaking. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too, kid.”

And it was even true.

The next week

The urgent call from Dr. Pratt came early in the morning on a Tuesday. “I’m terribly sorry, Mr. Bickham. Your friend went into a coma late last night. He was just in for a regular checkup, and keeled over right in the office.”

“Shit.” Frank had nothing else to say. A hole started opening up in the bottom of his gut. All he could think about was the kid. About his parents—how he could possibly console them. For the kid’s big sister, who now had to deal with not only a sick little brother, but one who was asleep, possibly for good. “I just went to the house yesterday, Doc. He looked fine then. What gives?”

“Frank—can I call you Frank? Look, sometimes people just get to this point, and there’s nothing we can do.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Frank yelled into the phone. “I did what you asked, and then some. We’ve saved up the blood. He’s got a six month supply now.” He could hear the doctor try to interrupt, but he steamrolled right over him. “Did you miss something? You missed his condition the first time around—it wasn’t until the habitation module blast that you discovered this thing. Could there be something else? Think, man!”

“Mr. Bickham, please! If you’ll let me speak. I was trying to tell you—it’s not Wixam. He’s fine. I’m talking about Mr. Smith.”

“Ed?”

“Yes, Ed. He came in yesterday. Said he felt a little funny. But we had a nice visit—he mentioned you several times. Said you were a good friend, that you visited at least twice a week. And then... well, he passed out. I couldn’t revive him. I’m sorry.”

Oh. Damn. Ed Smith was in a frickin’ coma.

“Aortic valve?”

“Huh? Oh, well, as his doctor, I can’t discuss his medical history with you. But since you’re, well...” Frank imagined the doctor was about to say, *since you’re Frank Bickham*. “Since you’re a close friend of his, I’ll say, no. It wasn’t his heart. It was something else. But I’m not at liberty to say, exactly. But his heart is not exactly an asset at the moment.”

“And? How long does he have?”

“Could be months. Could be hours. Or he could wake up tomorrow.”

Frank sighed. “Thank you, Doctor.”

Dammit. Dammit, dammit, dammit. He was going to lose. He’d

forever be known as the second man to set foot on Mars. And the second to die. Or the third. Maybe the fourth, given his terrible luck.

A siren jolted him out of his reverie. Red lights flashed, and the regular lighting dimmed down to auxiliary power levels.

"What the hell?" Those were the emergency evac lights. Every month the colonists of Mariner Valley participated in an emergency readiness drill, but that wasn't scheduled for another week.

He looked out the window of his penthouse apartment. People were rushing out into the streets, and heading towards Huygens Dome's emergency shelter. A minute later he'd joined them, shuffling down the street, urging people not to run, but to hurry, giving a hand to a lady that had stumbled over a dropped bag.

"Anyone know what's up?" asked a man nearby.

An engineer nearby answered, "Must be Hab Mod Twelve. We've been having problems down there ever since the explosion. Ain't surprised something else happened down there."

Habitation module twelve. He'd read reports about the persistent air leak over there, and now it looked like the situation had deteriorated.

He changed direction, and a minute later he was outside the administration building. The desk operator was gone, so he strolled right into the emergency meeting of the governor and the corporate board, who were grilling the senior engineering staff.

"So you're saying there's no oxygen left in Huygen's tank? None? What the hell happened to it?" said Governor Ladro to an engineer, who looked like he'd rather be fixing something than explaining something.

"That's correct, sir."

"How? Oh. Don't tell me." He slapped a hand mockingly on his forehead. "Let me guess. It was an engineering shortcut by Interplanetary staff when they set the place up."

"That about sums it up, sir. It cost far less for habitation module twelve to share the auxiliary oxygen tank with Huygens. And then the explosion last week damaged the sensors in the tank, so that we had no idea it was empty until an hour ago. The persistent leak over in twelve sucked it dry, and we never even knew."

The governor glared at the corporate board. "Good thing the stock price is up, huh? Sure made this whole adventure worth it." He turned back to the engineering staff. "Ok, I want a solution. Fast."

The engineer stammered. "Well, the other problem is that... well, there's about ten other problems. All video feeds in Twelve are out. Repair drones are inoperative since the main comm package linking Twelve with Huygens was still being repaired. Half of Twelve is still at vacuum, and the other half is steadily losing pressure. I won't bore

you with the details, but we have a solution. All it will take is someone going in, repairing a few valves, pushing a few buttons that we can't do remotely, and hightailing it back to the airlock just in case we have an explosive mix with the methane leak again."

"Methane leak?" said Ladro. "Unbelievable."

One of the assistant engineers raised a hand. "Methane leak. Just discovered it this morning when we switched over to the auxiliary sensors in Twelve. We think the methane check valves... uh, let's just say they didn't so much *check* as they *encouraged* the flow. Cheap Chinese knockoffs."

Ladro eyed the corporate board cooly. "And the stock price keeps going up." They all either glared at him, or squirmed in their chairs.

The head engineer nodded. "As I was saying, one person can do it, but it will be extremely dangerous. The risk of injury—or worse—is very high. I'd say we send either Farnsworth or—"

"Send me."

Frank could hardly believe the words came out of his mouth. So he repeated them to make sure they were his. "Send me."

Governor Ladro shook his head. "No. Absolutely not. We need you, Mr. Bickham. You're too important to spare. You're an inspiration to everyone in the colony—if we lost you, we'd have a serious morale problem on our hands." He turned back to the head engineer, but before he could say anything else, Frank decided to lie. There simply wasn't time to come up with an excuse that would mask the truth.

"Governor, I'm dying. Doc Pratt says I've got a month. Tops. Chronic, terribly painful condition—this doesn't end well for me know matter how you look at it. Seriously—send me."

Ladro eyed him skeptically, but asked the chief engineer, "can he do it? If you guide him over the comm?"

"I don't see why not. He was the third man on Mars, after all. He should know his shit."

"Second."

"Excuse me?" said the engineer.

"*Second* man on Mars. But the first to die, apparently. What luck!" He laughed a little too loud, and started coughing when no one else joined in. "Well, shit. I guess I better go suit up."

Two hours later

Frank cranked on the wrench, tightening one last gas fitting into place. "That's it," he said into his commlink. "How's the flow?"

The chief engineer's voice sounded over the speaker in his helmet.

“No flow yet. Still not getting an accurate atmospheric composition over there. You’re either at ten percent methane, ninety percent methane, or, well, there could be no atmosphere at all. What do you read on your suit?”

Frank eyed the analogue pressure gauge on his forearm—luckily it was a pre-Interplanetary Reserve suit, so the damn thing still worked just fine. “I’m reading half an atmosphere. But no idea how much is methane, how much is nitrogen, and how much is hot air escaping from Interplanetary’s CEO’s hairy ass.” He grinned. He knew the conversation was being broadcast throughout the colony, and would be heard on Earth about six minutes later. The CEO would probably bust a gasket, but served the bastard right.

Whatever he did, Frank was minutes away from glory. No matter what happened when the flow turned back on. He’d repeated his little trick on habitation module twelve’s airlock as soon as he passed the threshold, the outer door had sealed, and he was out of sight of the engineering crew. The moment he stepped back into that thing and cycled the air, the inner airlock door would jam, permanently lock, and all the air in both the airlock and half of habitation module twelve would escape out into the near vacuum of Mar’s atmosphere.

“Ok,” said the engineer. “We’re going to start the flow. You’re either about to be able to breathe without your suit, or explode. Godspeed, Mr. Bickham.”

“Roger that.” He raised his voice, knowing that the entire colony was listening. That he was being recorded for history. “And if I don’t make it out of here, I just want every Martian in the sound of my voice to know that... that it was an honor serving with you. These past few months I’ve made wonderful friends, I’ve lived with you, loved you, and if I don’t come back from this, my only hope is that I’ve made your lives a little better. What can any man really hope for when he’s gone? Thank you. Frank out.”

He closed his eyes, waiting for the possible explosion. A minute passed. Two minutes. Then a voice. “Frank? You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“Good news. The air is cycled, and optimal oxygen flow restored, now from the Tycho Dome. Congratulations, sir! You’re not only alive, but saved everyone in Huygens dome.”

He heard a cheer from everyone in the room on the other side of the comm, but all he could think was, Damn, I guess I’ve got to do this the hard way.

“Roger that. Heading to airlock now.” He worked his way from the engineering alcove in habitation module twelve to the airlock, and before initiating the irreversible process that would jam the door and vent the whole module, he sat down to check his messages one last

time. He'd sent one final note to his granddaughter, Ramona. Looked like she hadn't replied yet, so he burned another minute rereading his message to her.

Sweetie,

I'm about to do something very dangerous to help the colony, and if I don't come out of this I just wanted you to know I love you, and I'm proud of you. You're a wonderful mom, and an amazing lawyer. Please give Sammy and Ted big kisses from me.

Ramona, you asked me, right before I got my assignment here back in November, what I wanted to be remembered for. I think by asking me that you were trying to get me to change my mind about coming here. You wanted me to stay with you and Sammy and Ted. I wanted that too. But I also wanted something more.

I want to matter. I want my existence to have mattered. For people to remember that I was here, and that I was here for a damn good reason. I want people to say, "Frank was here, and thank God he was."

Doing this thing that I'm doing now is the best way I can think of to achieve that goal. And if it means I have to be the first man to die on Mars to achieve it, then so be it.

Goodbye, Sweetie.

Love, Grumpy.

He looked up at the airlock controls next to his seat. Everything was ready. If he delayed any longer the engineering team would begin to worry, and possibly suspect something.

History was waiting for him.

A chirp from his handset made him jump. He looked down, expecting to see a message from Ramona, but instead it was a call from someone in the colony.

It was the kid. Wix.

Tentatively, he accepted the call. "Hello?"

"Grumpy? Where are you?"

"I'm, ah... I'm in habitation module twelve, kid. Your old home."

"You said you'd come back today. Are you still coming?"

"Working on it, kid."

He thought he heard a little sniffle on the other end. "I miss you, Grumpy. You didn't come yesterday, either. Doc said you were in the hospital to give me blood, but you left right away without a visit. And then when you didn't come today, I thought you'd never come back. I... I..." He paused, then lowered his voice. "Grumpy, can I tell you a

secret?"

"Shoot, kid."

He whispered. "It made me cry. Please don't tell any of the other boys that I cried. It would be catatrophic."

"Catatrophic? Don't you mean catastr—"

"Yes, Grumpy. Catatrophic. Promise not to tell?"

Frank bit his lip. He stood up, and fingered the controls to the airlock.

Shit.

His handset beeped again. It was Ramona.

You matter to us, Grumpy. To a lot of people.
We love you very much. Do what you have to do.

Love, Ramona

"Grumpy? Promise?" said Wix.

Frank's hand trembled over the controls. History was waiting. His destiny was literally at his fingertips.

He would matter.

"I ... I—" he began, before adding, "aw, sh—" He stopped himself.

"Shamwow? I still think you made that up."

Frank chuckled. "Ok. I admit it. I made it up. I was going to say *shit*."

Wixam lowered his voice to a mocking, sarcastic tone. "No shit, Grumpy."

Frank lost it, convulsing in laughter. "Kid? Are you sure you're six? Fine. Fine. I promise. No one will ever know you cried when I didn't come visit you. My lips are sealed. Forever."

"Forever? Why? Are you dying?"

Frank laughed again. "Not today, kid. Then I wouldn't be able to visit you. How's five o'clock sound?"

Two and a half months after that

Frank sipped his coffee, and offered the other cup to the other man as he sat down at the table on Bickam Boulevard. "Will Doc Pratt let you drink it?"

"Do I care what he says?" said Ed Smith, an oxygen tube suspended below his nose.

"Good point." He turned to his other companion. "How's that hot chocolate?"

“Tastes like shamwow,” said Wixam Hanuman.

“Well you’re late for school anyway. Get.” Frank waved a hand, shooing the kid away. Wix gulped the rest of it down, stuck out his tongue at Frank, and trotted off down the street.

“Turn it up, will you? I want to hear if everyone made it.” Ed motioned up to the TV, which was playing the CNN feed.

Frank waved a hand and said, “volume up.”

“—and ongoing coverage of the Mars shuttle crash. With me now is the media relations officer for Interplanetary Reserve with an update.” The new anchor on the screen turned to a mousy man in a crisp suit seated next to him.

“Thank you, Jim.” The mousy man turned to the camera. “I’m afraid we have bad news to add to the good news I delivered earlier. While it is true that the shuttle made a miraculous crash landing and remained mostly intact, it is with heavy heart that I announce that there was, in fact, one fatality. Jerry H. Su, flight engineer on the shuttle’s voyage, sustained life-threatening injuries during the crash, and, unfortunately, did not make it. I’ve spoken with the American President, and he will posthumously be awarded the presidential Medal of Freedom. The French President will award him the legion of —”

“Well ain’t that something,” said Smith. “Wasn’t he…?”

“Yeah.”

“And now he’s…?”

“Yeah.”

Ed shook his head, incredulously, the oxygen tube wagging back and forth. “The first man to walk on Mars, and now the first man to die on Mars. Funny how things work. He comes all that way, lives a life like that, all to die in a fiery crash for nothing. Poor guy. I guess he’ll be in the history books, or something.”

“Or something,” Frank repeated, glumly.

It seemed Ed was intent on watching the broadcast, but Frank had no such interest. Luckily, he noticed the notebook lying on the table.

“Shit. Wix left his schoolbook. Enjoy your coffee, Ed,” he said, picking the pad up and starting off down Bickam Boulevard, heading towards the school.

He ran into someone carrying a bag of ‘just-add-water’ meals, and they spilled all over the sidewalk.

“Mrs. Doughby! I’m terribly, terribly sorry!” He stooped to pick them up. She joined him.

“Mr. Bickham! Not a problem!” She stuffed a few packages into the bag, and noticed Wix’s notebook. “Heading to school?”

“Yep. Wixam Hanuman left his schoolwork at my table.”

“Then you let me handle this mess. School’s starting in less than a

minute—if you don't get moving you'll be late."

Frank glanced at his watch. "Naw. I've got all the time in the world." He lowered his voice. "Plus, just between you and me, his teacher owes me one for that class presentation I gave last week. Nailed it."

"Well, in that case…" She trailed off, kneeling down to reach for a few that had strayed onto the street.

He stuffed the last package into her bag, and helped her up. "So? How's work going?"

Q&A with Nick Webb

Where did this story come from?

Someday, someone will be the very first human to die on another planet. I don't know if that makes me morbid or not, but it's fascinating to think about. Will they die there on a failed exploration mission? Or will they die there because they live there, and, well, dying is just what regular people *do*. I hope to be able to see that day, when living on another planet is so normal for people, that imagining people dying there feels entirely natural, because then we'll know we've finally arrived as a multi-planetary civilization.

Do you want to die on another planet?

No! I won't even get in an airplane!

Really?

I hate flying. But if space travel ever gets safe enough, with hundreds of safe launches per day, and as long as I'm over eighty or so and lived a full life, then I'd absolutely like to go to another planet.

So are you Frank Bickham, your protagonist? He's an old guy who's lived a full life, and now wants to go live on another planet in retirement….

There might be a little Frank Bickham in me. Not that I'd feel compelled to have to be "the first" at something, like Frank is, but ever since I grew up watching Captain Picard vacation on Riisa, I knew I wanted to get to another world. Someday. When it's safe. And

cheap.

Where can readers find you, and learn more about your books?

My website, for one: nickwebbwrites.com

Or, I'm active on Facebook: facebook.com/authornickwebb

Last Pursuit
by *Piers Platt*

ONE MORE, DESH thought. *Forty-nine kills completed. Just one more, and then you're out.* But no sooner had the thought formed than a mission update notification appeared in his heads-up display, and he felt a pit form in his stomach, cold dread washing over him. *Don't get worked up yet. It could be a routine update.* He forced himself to ignore the notification, and instead checked his ship's arrival time on his datascroll. *Five minutes to deceleration.*

Desh loathed interstellar travel, from the queasy feeling of the faster-than-light accelerations, to the interminable waiting aboard the transports. In an effort to encourage travel, the spaceliners featured exercise rooms and entertainment centers whose use could be purchased for a nominal fee, but a week or more of traveling through the vacuum of deep space drove most passengers slightly insane regardless of the activities available. For Desh, it just meant more idle time to spend fretting about the mission, worrying the details like a sore tooth. And more time trying to forget the anguished faces of his victims. So he sighed with relief when the arrival announcement flashed on the bulkhead displays, and he quickly made his way to his cabin to finish packing his gear.

At one time in his career, arrival announcements had triggered an adrenaline rush in anticipation of the mission, but all he felt today was exhaustion.

Exhaustion is acceptable, given the circumstances, Desh reasoned. *But it's still a sign of weakness.* His target had canceled his business trip, but Desh had already been en route to the man's intended destination, and he had wasted nearly two weeks traveling to the wrong planet as a result. *Two weeks stuck on spaceliners, with nothing to do but watch the mission clock count down.*

But that's not why I'm tired.

He touched the metal bracelet on his right wrist, his finger sliding over the smooth surface, coming to rest on the button in the center. As he pressed it, a three-dimensional hologram appeared over the bracelet, a spinning golden number 1.

My first kill, fresh out of Training. Strangling a loan shark in his office above a laundromat.

As Desh watched, the numbers changed, counting upwards with increasing speed.

Fourteen: poisoning a minor government functionary on Mars.

Thirty-two: faking the suicide of an unfaithful husband.

Each of his targets' faces clawed up out of his memory in turn, their eyes full of fear, anger, desperation. And then the numbers stopped, and he watched as the '49' spun slowly, and then winked out. Number fifty would soon have a face, too, but for Desh, the number meant only one thing.

Freedom.

Over the long, tense years, the meaning of those numbers had changed so much. Desh had signed his contract with the Guild to vault his way out of poverty and into the privileged class, like most guildsmen. The Guild's famous "Fifty for Fifty" deal was the same for each of them: if he completed fifty missions, he would be entitled to fifty percent of the commissions he had earned. He couldn't choose his missions, and he couldn't fail to complete those he was assigned —success, or death while trying, were the only acceptable outcomes. Guild training was brutally direct on this matter; Desh still remembered the video they had used to illustrate their point, in which several masked men demonstrated just how long a guildsman who tried to break his contract could be made to suffer before dying. Recalling the images, Desh shuddered involuntarily. The sizable fortune that would soon be deposited to his account was of only marginal interest to Desh; what mattered far more was bringing an end to the missions, the ceaseless trips through the void, and the pleading, desperate faces he found waiting for him with each new assignment.

Desh opened his datascroll and accessed the mission brief for the hundredth time, but instead of reading, he watched the ship's external footage on his cabin's viewscreen. Silently, the spaceliner coasted through the navigational satellites, whose yellow lights winked to show the path toward Aleppo. His mission brief stated that the planet's gravity was slightly less than that of Earth, which of course allowed them to excel at the industrial work Aleppo had become known for. Even a five percent gravity drop could yield significantly higher profit margins, he knew, with less stress on heavy machinery and less fuel to boost the finished products into orbit. Desh shook his head, and forced his gaze away from the viewscreen, concentrating on the mission brief.

His target was an industrial baron who owned several interplanetary conglomerates, and whose draconian employment practices had upset the local unions. The man was wealthy enough that he might have been able to live on Earth, but having been born on Aleppo, he had decided to call it home. Given the barren terrain appearing on his viewscreen, Desh failed to see its appeal entirely. The colonists had begun atmospheric introduction, but they were still decades away from making the atmosphere breathable, and since most

of the world's industrial plants belched out toxic gases anyway, nobody was in a particular hurry. A rocky planet, rich in ore deposits but utterly devoid of indigenous life, Aleppo's chief terrain feature was a massive canyon nearly encircling the equator, as if a giant claw had torn the planet's crust. It was in this canyon that the colonists had built their settlements, choosing to remain below ground and inconspicuous in case the planet hid any nasty surprises the early explorers had failed to document. Desh planned to follow their example.

The ship slowed again in final approach, and Desh felt the stabilizers and maneuvering rockets firing. He picked up his backpack and headed for the ship's docking tubes. The docking process was completed in less than ten minutes, and Desh was one of the first passengers off. Once onto the planet's orbiting transfer station, he followed the signs for the planetary shuttle terminal.

In the terminal, Desh walked past the mass transit shuttles and found the private shuttle area. Several pilots offered Desh their services, but a slight man kneeling and tightening his boot cords caught Desh's attention. *That's the signal.* One benefit of being in the Guild—though the downsides were many—was that Desh had never been disappointed with the quality of personnel hired to support his missions. The pilot straightened as Desh approached, motioning toward his shuttle and offering to shoulder the bag for him. Desh declined, and the man shrugged.

Desh took a seat in the passenger cabin, closing the privacy door to the cockpit to discourage the pilot from initiating a conversation. The shuttle ride was smooth, no doubt another effect of the planet's low gravity and thin atmosphere.

Okay, you've put it off long enough. Call Headquarters.

He pulled out his holophone, dialed a number from memory, and then punched in a code at the prompt.

"The line is encrypted, you may proceed," a robotic voice told him.

"Contractor 211, requesting mission update," he told his phone.

"You exited faster-than-light travel almost twenty-five minutes ago—why have you taken so long to call in?" a supervisor asked him.

"I didn't think I should call in from a public shuttle terminal," Desh told the man, exasperated.

"You should have called from your spaceliner," the supervisor chided him.

"I'm calling now," Desh said. "What's the update?"

"The client's becoming impatient—this was a time sensitive mission, and we're several weeks behind schedule."

Desh tapped his fingers against his armrest with impatience. "Did

you remind them it was their intelligence that sent me to the wrong planet?"

"Regardless, they've opened up the contract to local bidders."

"They've done what?" Desh asked, sitting up in his seat.

"The contract is still valid, but fees will be paid to whichever party completes the assignment first."

"And if the local guys, if these... *amateurs*... get there first?" Desh asked.

"That would constitute a failed mission," the man told him. "And I don't have to remind you of the consequences of failure."

Desh swore. "I just got here! I haven't even made contact with the target yet. I need to do reconnaissance and surveillance, plan the mission—"

"Normally, yes. In the circumstances, I suggest you cut those activities short."

"How long has the contract been open to locals?"

"Three days."

"Well, the target's security team will have caught wind of it by now. They're going to be expecting an attempt."

The line stayed silent.

"My last mission, and you're telling me my only option is to do a hit-and-run on a target that's expecting me, with local hitmen likely to interfere," Desh pointed out.

"Headquarters staff will be standing by to support you in whatever way we can," the supervisor replied.

"That's reassuring," Desh told him, and hung up.

Desh felt a trickle of sweat run down the back of his neck—the force of gravity was becoming more noticeable. He opened the cabin door and saw that the planet's canyon now filled the forward viewport. Desh walked forward and took the seat next to the pilot.

He pulled up a picture of the target on his datascroll and held it out for the pilot to see. "I need to know if this man is alive."

The pilot frowned, but glanced at the photo. "Lloyds? Yeah, he's alive."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. If a guy like Lloyds got taken down, the whole planet would know about it."

Desh grimaced. *Wonderful.*

"I think he's opening a new titanium refinery on the South Rim this evening," the pilot continued. "I saw something about it in the news last night."

"Take me there."

The pilot began to ask Desh a question, but caught sight of Desh's expression, and thought better of it. Instead, he concentrated on

guiding the shuttle onto its new course.

Desh set his backpack on his lap, opening the main compartment to unfold a large, clamshell-shaped device, his Forge. *Hello, old friend.* He ran his open palm lightly over the smooth metal, smiling faintly. *I hope they let me keep you when this is all over. Just for old time's sake.* Accessing his internal computer, he sent the device a series of commands, and watched as nanomachines in the backpack's open tray whirred to life. The butt of an auto-pistol soon began to emerge. The pilot glanced over briefly, then carefully kept his eyes fixed out the front viewport. While Desh waited, he slaved his internal communications device to the shuttle's radio.

"Radio check."

The pilot touched his earpiece and nodded. "I got you. We're coming over the South Rim."

Desh craned his neck to look out the polarized window next to him, noting a jagged edge of cliff close below them. Beyond the cliff's edge and far below it, a sprawling industrial park belched flame and fumes into the red sky. The pilot made a steep bank, bringing the craft down and sharply to the left, cruising just above the factories.

"What now?"

Desh thought for a second. "Give me a pass over the new plant."

Desh picked up the completed auto-pistol, loaded it with practiced ease, double-checked that its digital point-of-aim reticule appeared on the heads-up display of his optical implants, and then placed the weapon in the waistband of his pants. In his Forge, the nanomachines were already at work on a grenade.

"Coming up on the plant," the pilot reported.

"Slow down."

The pilot took the shuttle through a wide, slow turn, allowing Desh an excellent view of the plant out his window. None of the machinery seemed to be operating, but he identified the glass-domed main entrance by the large, lighted tunnel leading to it.

"See if you can find us somewhere inconspicuous to set down."

The pilot hesitated. "If you want to get in there, we're going to have to land in a bay with atmospheric seals... I don't have survival gear onboard."

Desh had forgotten the planet's air was not breathable. *Focus!* he told himself. *If we land in a bay, the shuttle's going to get recorded on security cameras. But I don't have a choice at this point.*

"Then set down in a bay. Close to the plant."

The bay the pilot chose was mercifully empty—he landed with a slight jolt, and the bay doors sealed behind them. As the bay repressurized, Desh slipped into a large trenchcoat, pocketed the grenade from his backpack, and then closed the device, slipping it on.

He took a minute to detail his plans with the pilot, and then exited the shuttle quickly, heading for the nearest air-sealed pedestrian tunnel. He pulled his coat close around his jumpsuit, hugging the thin material to him for protection.

There were no guards at the entrance to the new plant, and Desh allowed himself a silent sigh of relief. He stepped out of the entrance tunnel into a large, domed arboretum, ringed with shops and food stalls. The factory could be seen through enormous reinforced glass windows on the far side of the trees, the heavy pipes and valves looking strangely incongruous behind the imported trees.

Those trees must have cost a fortune.

His initial walk-through of the area yielded nothing: Lloyds was likely inside the plant itself, but the inner entrance to the plant was blocked by a security gate. He did notice several workers installing a podium on a small stage under the trees, however. *An official opening ceremony out here, maybe?* Desh remembered a mission, long ago, the target a recently-elected politician. He had set up his position on a rooftop across the city square with a long-range dart gun. Back then, he had been excited to be a guildsman, electrified at the prospect of so much wealth and the challenge of missions.

And how quickly that luster faded.

A flurry of movement in his peripheral vision caught Desh's eye, and he turned, looking back at the same entrance through which he had entered the arboretum. A man was walking out of the tunnel's arch, flanked by an aide and several alert-looking men whose demeanor immediately earned them the label 'bodyguard' in Desh's mind. Desh dialed up his optical implants, zooming in on the man's face, switching to infrared.

After a second, a notification popped up: *<Heat signature identified: target confirmed.>*

"I've got him," Desh said.

"Okay," the pilot replied over the radio. Desh could hear the whine of the shuttle's engines kicking on in the background.

He switched back to normal vision to count the security personnel. *Four. Wait—could be five,* he chided himself. *Don't get sloppy now and automatically dismiss that aide as a non-hostile.*

Lloyds and his entourage were headed in his general direction, so Desh pretended to study the menu options at the nearest food stall and let them approach, relaxing and breathing evenly. Then he saw two men across from him leave a store, heading straight for the target, eyes focused on the man. Desh swore under his breath.

And here come the local crew. And they're telegraphing their intentions like kids near a candy bowl.

Time slowed, as it always seemed to do in the seconds before an

engagement. The bodyguards had seen the threat, and by unspoken agreement, they tightened their formation around the target, protecting him with their bodies, while one of them stepped forward to confront the approaching men. The two local hitmen traded a worried look, and then yanked cut-off heavy rifles out of the boxes they were carrying, opening fire with an incoherent yell. Their fire was wild and undisciplined, but their first salvo killed the lead bodyguard and the aide.

Desh drew his pistol, dropping to his right knee in one fluid motion. The white crosshairs appeared on his heads-up display as he brought the weapon up, and he squeezed the trigger smoothly as the crosshair bracketed his first target. He fired two rounds, shifted aim, and fired two more, dropping the local hitmen in the span of three seconds. The surviving bodyguards, in the midst of returning fire, now turned to face Desh, surprised by the intercession of a third party. They aimed their pistols at Desh, keeping Lloyds kneeling in the center of their tight circle.

Desh stood up, pistol pointed at the ceiling, and yelled, “Interstellar Police, don’t fire!”

Killing an Interstellar officer carried a death sentence on many planets, but Desh knew he had only bought himself a second or two of confusion. He braced himself for the final push, and took a deep breath of air.

“Now!” he yelled.

Above the bodyguards, the shuttle erupted through the outer skin of the arboretum, shattering the airlock seal and showering the people below with fragments of glass and steel. The craft skewed wildly as the pilot fought to regain control. The three surviving bodyguards turned their heads to evaluate this new threat, their weapons no longer pointed at Desh. Holding his breath as the atmosphere vented out of the structure, Desh lobbed his fragmentation grenade at the security personnel. The detonation knocked the knot of bodyguards over, and Desh saw the target go down as well.

Probably dead, but no sense in cutting corners now.

He caught a glimpse of a team of armed security personnel pulling on oxygen masks back at the entrance to the factory, but ignored them and ran up to Lloyds, stopping to fire four rounds into the man’s inert body. Then he dashed over to the hovering shuttle.

His lungs burned from lack of oxygen and his vision began to blur by the time he reached the craft, but Desh managed to grab one of the shuttle’s support struts and pull himself into the cabin. The pilot sealed the door behind him, and Desh gasped in a gulp of fresh air.

“Get back to the transfer station!” Desh coughed.

The pilot veered out of the arboretum, deftly exiting through the

hole his craft had made, and accelerated to gain altitude, heading for high orbit and the freedom of an interstellar transport. On impulse, Desh checked his counter bracelet, tapping the button. A golden ‘50’ appeared above his wrist, spinning slowly. Desh closed his eyes and smiled, letting out a long sigh. An insistent beeping interrupted his reverie.

He opened his eyes and noted several red lights blinking on the shuttle’s dashboard.

“Equipment malfunction,” the pilot reported. “I think the boosters were damaged by the crash.”

Desh saw the numbers on the altimeter slow to a stop, and then reverse with growing rapidity. The pilot struggled wordlessly with the controls and then swore. Outside the window, the rocky landscape blurred as the craft went into a shallow spin. The pilot continued to fight with the controls, but Desh just let his head rest against the window, watching as the planet’s surface hurtled up toward them.

God, I’m tired.

But at least I’m free.

Q&A with Piers Platt

Wait, that's it? What happened to Desh?!?

Please have a seat. This might be hard for you to hear, but Desh... well, he didn't make it. I'm terribly sorry. BUT! This short story inspired a much longer story, so if you liked the concept of the Guild and their "Fifty for Fifty" assassins, you can jump back into this world in the *Janus Group* series, which starts with *Rath's Deception*. I like to describe it as "Bourne meets Bladerunner"—a fast-paced conspiracy thriller in a sci-fi setting.

So what's your deal?

Aside from writing? I'm kind of tricky to pigeonhole. I was a boy chorister growing up – the red robes, daily church services, the whole thing. But I'm also a combat veteran, who led tank and scout platoons in Iraq. I love to scuba dive with my wife, and spend time with our daughter. She's working on her reading and writing, which lately

means making long lists of things like her favorite foods: MACRONEE! PEETSA! It's awesome.

Why do you write sci-fi?

The limitless possibilities—it's a blank canvas. I know creativity sometimes gets fueled by working within constraints, but I love that sci-fi has so much potential variety. It's truly *speculative* fiction, bounded only by the author's imagination.

Where do you come up with this stuff?

I get a lot of ideas in the shower! I have no idea why. I'll get out and run downstairs dripping wet and make some notes on the next chapter. Maybe I should try writing in the shower. Are waterproof laptops a thing yet?

Train A leaves Westford at 70 mph heading toward Eastford, 260 miles away. At the same time Train B, traveling 60 mph, leaves Eastford heading toward Westford. When do the two trains meet?

Oh man, I hate these questions. Okay, distance = rate x time... carry the four... solve for X... square root of pi...and the answer is: 2 hours later.

Show your work.

No.

Where can I find your other stuff?

You can find links to *Rath's Deception* and all of my other books on my website at www.piersplatt.com, where you can also get a free copy of *Combat and Other Shenanigans*, my New York Times bestselling Iraq War memoir. Thanks for reading!

Relic Hunter
by *Chris Fox*

1

"DO YOU HAVE any idea who I am?" Wes asked, resting his hand casually on the grip of his Welks. The heavy pistol felt massive strapped at his side, and he prayed he wouldn't have to draw it. The last time he'd fired the weapon his wrist had hurt for three days.

"Yeah," the armored, much larger, figure on the barstool next to him said, looming a bit closer. "You're the guy whose arms I'm about to pull off."

Wes considered his options, which seemed markedly limited. The man, if it was a man, wore a full suit of iron grey power armor. He wasn't familiar with the model, though the fact that it had four arms suggested Ikadian design. If that was the case then only a shot to the faceplate had any chance of penetrating. Unfortunately he wasn't a very good shot, and given how badly he was shaking his aim would be even worse.

"Listen, friend," Wesley drawled, playing for time. He drew on all the frontier holos he'd grown up with, trying to channel the hero. "I don't know what your quarrel is, but I've had a tough day. I just want to have a brandy and get some sleep. What's say we just pretend we never met, and then we don't have to make a mess all over the bartender's nice furniture?"

"Don't hold back on account of me," the bartender chittered, a tall skinny Rhoidian with mottled green skin. His antennae quivered in amusement, the only readable expression on an insectoid face.

Great. Wes darted a glance at the door. He might be able to keep tables between himself and the four armed bully long enough to escape out the door, but if he ran he'd never be able to set foot here again. That would make it impossible to hire a ship, which would make the entire trip a waste of time. He'd have to return to Corentia a failure. There had to be another option.

The armored figure moved with incredible speed, making his decision for him. The two bottom arms lunged, metallic claws reaching for his waist. At the same time the upper right claw sailed toward his face, and Wes knew that if it connected his jaw would be liquefied by the impact. He scrambled backward, his right foot catching on the bottom of the stool. The motion spilled both him and

the stool to the pitted metal floor, and he landed heavily on his back as the robotic limbs swung through the space he'd just occupied. Wes snapped up the strap on the holster, wrenching the Welks out and aiming for the faceplate. He squeezed the trigger, elated as the weapon gave a deep boom. He'd remembered to take the safety off this time.

The armored figure staggered back as his faceplate shattered. Unfortunately, Wes wasn't in any position to appreciate it. The recoil from the shot snapped the pistol back, and there was a thunderous crack as it crushed his nose. He tasted blood and snot, blinking away tears as he scrambled backwards. Through the shattered faceplate he saw his assailant's face, and he nearly wet himself as he realized what he was facing. That face was a marbled grey and white, with the angular features of a Marbok. The thing inside the armor had a carapace made of stone, and was probably tougher out of the armor than it was in it. His shot to the faceplate hadn't done more than upset it.

"Oh vuck," he muttered, tasting more blood.

"Why don't you leave the kid alone, Gantok?" a clear feminine voice rang out, drawing his gaze. "He's already broken his own nose, and he's clearly about to wet himself."

Wes saw a woman rising from a table just a few feet away. Her garb was similar to his own, a brown duster over black leather pants and a plain white shirt. The difference though, was hers was worn from long use. His own had been purchased just prior to the trip, and had been pristine until he'd bled all over them. The woman took a step toward the Marbok, drawing a shotgun from her boot holster. The weapon looked lethal, though it was probably not much of a threat to a Marbok. Her face made the gun look friendly. She was maybe forty, with shoulder length blonde hair and frosty grey eyes.

"Stay out of this, Tysha. He damaged my armor. I'm going to pulp him. I'll pulp you too, if you don't get the frag out of the way," the Marbok rumbled. Wes scrambled back again, stopping when he unexpectedly bumped into another figure. This one had also risen from the woman's table, and was even more intimidating.

The man towered over Wes, all muscle and scowls. He had dark skin and long, black dreads. That wasn't what made him so terrifying though. He wore a skin-tight red and black suit, the mark of a Melter. As in brain Melter. Fortunately he didn't seem to notice Wes, instead folding his arms across his chest as he stared at the Marbok.

"You're going to walk away," the blonde woman said, taking a protective step in front of Wes. "Or Tantor here is going to boil your brains until you're about as intelligent as the rock that birthed you."

The Marbok shot Wes another glare, and Wes dropped eye

contact immediately. No sense inflaming the situation further. He watched out of the corner of his eye as the Marbok's attention focused on the Melter, Tantor apparently. Its eyes narrowed, but then it spun on a metallic heel and stalked out of the bar. It kicked the table closest to the door on the way out, shattering it into a pile of plastic shards. Wes winced, knowing that could have been him.

"You can get up now," came a pleasant voice from the table.

Wes scrambled to his feet, sizing up the speaker. She was a beautiful brunette about his age, with light green eyes and a dimpled smile. The grease stains on one worn leather sleeve suggested she was a mechanic. Another woman sat next to her, a redhead in her early thirties. She was sipping something pink, and had a single eyebrow raised. The motion exposed a bit of chrome near her temple. A pilot then.

"Thank you," Wes said, trying to regain his composure. He faced the blonde woman with the shotgun. "You may have just saved that Marbok's life. I didn't want to resort to further violence, but I'd have done what I had to."

"Which is what, bleed on him?" the redhead said, eliciting laughter from the pretty mechanic. Wes' cheeks heated.

The Melter shot the pair a baleful glare, then fished a grey cloth from his pocket and offered it to Wes. "Clean yourself up."

2

Wes held the cloth up to his nose, wincing in pain as it rapidly filled with blood. He fumbled at his pistol, managing to holster it less than gracefully on the third attempt.

"You're an archeologist," the blonde woman said, returning her shotgun to the boot holster. She settled back into her seat, eyeing him appraisingly as she folded her arms behind her head.

"One of the finest," Wes assured her, grabbing a chair from the next table and pulling it over. He sat with a flourish, making a great show of removing his duster. He draped it over the chair before sitting. "How did you know?"

"Because we see two or three of you in every port. I'm Tysha, by the way," the blonde woman said. She offered him a hand, which Wes shook. Her grip was surprisingly firm. Well, maybe not so surprising. "Let me guess. You just graduated from an academy, a prestigious one from the look of you. You shelled out for some fancy clothes, a gun you don't know how to use, and you hitched a warp on the first transport you could find."

Wes opened his mouth, then shut it with a click. She was spot on,

much as he hated to admit it. “Is it that obvious?”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of,” the mechanic said, reaching over to squeeze his shoulder. Her eyes were so *green*. “Don’t let the captain fluster you. Archeologists aren’t supposed to be fighters. You’re supposed to hire muscle to do that for you.”

“I’m not *just* an archeologist,” Wes shot back, squaring his shoulders. “I’m a relic hunter, and I’m here in pursuit of an incredible treasure.”

“A relic hunter? Like, from the holos?” the pretty mechanic asked, blinking. She cracked a grin. “I used to watch those too, when I was about ten. Tally ho!”

“Uh,” Wes began, mentally backpedaling. Not many people remembered the Relic Hunter show. “Yeah, kind of like the show. Tally ho,” he trailed off as amused smiles broke out all around him. She’d been playing with him.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t resist,” the mechanic said, offering a delicate hand. “I’m Sadie. Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Wesley VonCamp, the sixteenth,” Wes said, sitting up straighter. “I just graduated from—”

“Not to cut this short,” the captain interrupted, leaning forward in her chair. “But we’re on a tight schedule. You’re looking to hire a ship, yes?”

“Yes, how did you—” Wes began.

“A ship that can take you through the debris field to the gas giant below?” the redhead asked. She was the only one who hadn’t offered a name yet.

“That’s right,” Wes said, letting his gaze range over the four strangers. He mopped a bit more blood from his nose, then set the cloth on the table in front of him. “If I can get below the debris field I believe I can get us inside the Elderi Spire. We’ll all be rich *and* famous. I can pay you well.”

“I think we might be able to come to an arrangement,” the captain said, giving him a smile that wasn’t at all comforting. “We have a ship, a pilot, and a crew capable of getting you onto that station.”

“Lovely,” Wes said, his grin drawing a wince of pain. “How much would it take to hire you?”

“We don’t work for anyone else,” the captain said, shaking her head. She leaned closer still, eyes drawing him in as she lowered her tone. “But we might be willing to add you to our crew. You’d get a standard share, just like the rest of us. *If* you can really bypass the outer security.”

“That’s a ship?” Wes asked, adjusting his glasses as he studied a vessel that should have been decommissioned before he was born. He stared at the trawler parked outside the station, a sleek chrome boarding tube clashing with the pitted hull. The long tubular ship had a single engine in the back, and tiny thrusters on the sides. It looked like the toy rockets they set off in elementary science, and probably had even less maneuverability. “It looks like floating garbage.”

“Yeah, well beggars and all that,” the captain said, gently but firmly guiding Wes toward the mouth of the docking tunnel. She threw her duster over her shotgun, eyeing a station security officer as they passed. Tysha was obviously in a hurry, though damned if Wes could figure out why. Elderi Spire had been there for millennia, and no one had breached it. They had all the time in the world. He didn’t resist as she hurried him up the docking tube, toward the airlock.

“Let me guess,” Wes said, smiling weakly at the captain. “Your ship has got it where it counts? I’ve watched enough action holo to know she’s probably got some surprises.”

“It will be a surprise if we survive the trip,” Sadie said, rolling her eyes. She quickened her pace until she was at Wes’s side, chestnut hair framing her face. He tried not to stare. “You had it right when you said garbage. Shirley is basically floating garbage that drifts roughly in the direction we tell her to go. There are a half dozen systems that could give in the next hour, and if any one of them does we’ll all die horribly.”

“Uh,” Wes said, the captain all but dragging him toward the ship’s docking port.

“We’ll be fine,” the captain said. “Sadie is an alarmist. We haven’t died yet. I think she just likes making the whole mechanic thing sound hard.”

“You what?” Sadie asked, eyes flashing. Anger rolled off her in waves. “I’ve given you a list of parts. Every day. For months.”

“We don’t have the funds,” the captain countered, refusing to meet Sadie’s gaze. She focused those icy eyes on Wes, deftly trying to change the subject. “Hopefully our new friend here can see to that. You said you can get us inside the Elderi Spire. That sounds like horse crap, but I’m willing to give you a chance.”

The rusty, pitted, airlock door slid grudgingly upward at their approach, the ancient metal grinding to a halt about four feet off the deck. Tantor leaned forward, seizing the base of the door and jerking it up another foot. The door refused to go further, stopping a good foot short of where it should have.

The captain ducked underneath, and one by one so did the others. Wes took a deep breath, then followed. The air beyond was stale. Not life threateningly so, but enough that he had to work a little at

breathing. He caught a faint whiff of something foul enough to make his eyes water, and was positive he didn't want to know what it was.

The lights were dim, flickering occasionally as the crew made their way up the narrow catwalk. It overlooked a sizable hold, currently occupied by nothing more than a large smelly pile of brown goo in one corner. The thing made Wes' eyes water, and the odor was much more powerful in this room.

"What is that?" Wes asked, withdrawing a handkerchief to cover his mouth.

"Garidian guano," the Captain said, giving him an impatient look. Wes hurried after her, trying to look unthreatening. He didn't mind admitting that the woman scared him. She eyed him sidelong, then sighed. "It purifies the air. Stuff produces more oxygen than just about any other recycling system."

"And it's free," Sadie interjected.

They continued up the catwalk and had almost reached a doorway when they were plunged into sudden darkness. The faint whirring of the engines was done.

"Everyone stay where you are for a sec," Sadie's voice came from his right. Her boots clomped across the catwalk, and a flashlight flared to life near the far wall. Sadie was bent over some sort of panel, opened to expose a mass of wiring. "Sometimes the main bus shorts, and we have to do a restart. It will only take a minute."

She hummed to herself, stripping rubber covering back from a pair of wires. Then she briefly touched them together. A spark shot between them. She did it again, then a third time. The ship rumbled reluctantly back to life, and the lights flickered back on. Sadie turned a triumphant smile in his direction, and Wes returned it.

"We can give you an official tour later," the captain said, pulling Wes along.

She ducked through the hatch beyond the catwalk. It opened into a small kitchen, designed to serve about a half dozen very friendly passengers. The shelves were bare except for a few dozen cans of soytien, and a cistern full of what Wes hoped was water.

The captain grabbed a ladle from the counter, scooping up some liquid and drinking it thirstily. She wiped her chin as she turned to fetch him. "Kestrel, that's the charming redhead over there, is going to get us underway while you tell us exactly how you plan to get past the Elderi Spire's security."

"On it," the redhead said, jumping up to tap the ceiling as she headed up the corridor leading out the other side of the kitchen.

The captain rested her butt against the sink, crossing her arms and studying him intently. Wes tried not to wither under the scrutiny, but it was hard to maintain composure when staring into that kind of

abyss. This woman could kill him if he didn't produce the results she was after.

"I graduated from Corentia University about a month ago," Wes said, moving to sit on the bench next to the table. He licked his lips, and resisted the urge to drink from the barrel. He wasn't quite that desperate yet. "My parents offered to buy me a small vessel so I could explore, but I declined. Instead, I asked them to buy me this. It was a little more expensive, but I persuaded them."

Wes reached into his collar, tugging at the thin silver chain from under his baggy shirt. He withdrew a small golden amulet that fit in the palm of his hand. It was shaped like a shield, and bore a pair of stylized pistols with crossed barrels. He could feel the glyphs carved into the back, incredibly fine script.

"That's going to get us past security?" Sadie asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow. She sat on the bench next to him, leaning closer to study it. Wes tried not to look down her shirt.

"Why would a hunk of gold cost more than a ship?" Tantor rumbled, looming behind Wes. It was damned creepy, especially knowing that the tall black man could quite literally boil his brain. Well maybe *not* literally, but Wes wasn't eager to test that.

"Could you stop looming like that?" Wes asked, half turning to face the big man. "It's very difficult to explain with you lurking there."

To Wes's immense surprise Tantor's expression softened. He met the captain's gaze, then gave a guilty smile. "Looming is kind of my thing. You know that."

"Stop scaring the kid," the captain said, her eyes narrowing.

Tantor dropped his gaze. "Sorry, kid."

"So this hunk of metal," Wes said, holding up the amulet. It was heavier than it should have been. "Is a lot more important than it appears. It's one of three known to exist, each held in a private collection."

"But what is it?" Sadie asked.

"I recognize the symbol," the captain said, extending a hand to Wes. He considered for a moment, then gave her the shield. "This is emblazoned above the docking bay at the Spire. I'm starting to think the kid might be on to something. Go on, kid."

"I noticed that too," Wes said, grinning. "My thesis was written about the Spire. It's always intrigued me, the idea that people have been trying to get in for centuries with no luck. I've read every account, and studied every vid about the Spire. The sigil is completely absent from every other planet the Elderi inhabited, which suggests that the Spire must be really important.

"During my research I ran across the three amulets. I wasn't the

first to guess that they might be connected, but since there was no obvious key or use for the sigil people dismissed the connection," Wes continued. He was very conscious of Sadie watching, expression rapt. It made him feel like a real archeologist. "Some people wanted to test them anyway, but none of the private owners were willing to go along with it. I figured the only way to test this was to buy a sigil, and take it to the Spire."

"So you don't really have any idea if this will open the door or not?" the captain said, handing the amulet back to Wes. He looped the chain over his neck and tucked it back into his shirt.

"I'm not one hundred percent sure, but if there is any way to gain entry to the Spire, this is it," Wes said, probably a bit too eagerly. It was hard not to be enthusiastic about this stuff. "I figure the trip is at least worth the fuel. If I'm wrong, that's all it will cost you."

"Captain," Kestrel's voice called from the hallway leading deeper into the ship. Footsteps came pounding up the metal floor. Kestrel was panting. "You're going to want to see this. We're being hailed."

"By who?" the captain asked, her eyes going icy.

"The Marbok from the bar," she said, resting one hand against the wall. "He wants to talk to you, right away."

4

Wes became very small, peering from the captain, to the towering Melter, to Sadie. He knew the altercation with the Marbok was his fault, and hoped it wasn't landing them in trouble.

"Gantok is a pain in the ass, but hopefully we can reason with him," the captain said, rising from the counter and moving briskly up the hallway. Everyone else followed, so Wes joined the back of the line. They threaded up a narrow corridor, toward the nose of the ship. The walls grew thicker, and the corridor more narrow, the closer they got to the cockpit.

Kestrel reached the cockpit first, sliding into an ancient leather chair that smelled of sweat even from the back of the room. The redhead plugged a ragged cord into her temple, her eyes closing as she slumped into the seat. A moment later a cracked viewscreen above the central console flared slowly to life. It showed a stylized version of Kestrel, her eyes a deep purple and her hair a much less natural shade of red.

"Patching the call through now, captain," Kestrel said, her holographic likeness disappearing. The screen filled with an unfamiliar bridge, the walls covered in what appeared to be granite. Several stations dotted the cockpit, each a wide black chair rooted

into the stone floor. All were manned by dour looking Marbok, though thankfully none had the armor Gantok had worn in the bar.

Wes recognized the Marbok assailant from the bar. Gantok sat in a chair that was raised a little higher than the others, a wide data pad sitting absently on his armored knee. He leaned forward, a weathered crevice appearing in his mountainous face as he slowly smiled. “Hello again, Tysha. I told you this wasn’t over.”

“What do you want, Gantok?” the captain asked, voice flat as the deck. She stared up at the viewscreen, brushing a lock of hair from her shoulder as if the Marbok were the least important thing she had to deal with.

“I’m going to tell you a little story, captain,” the Marbok said, crossing his rocky arms behind his head. “A little worm made his way into that bar looking for a ship to take him to the Elderi Spire. Somehow he convinced a crew that it was worthwhile, a crew with a shrewd reputation. Do you know what that says to me? It says that this little worm might just have a way to breach the security barrier. Why else would you travel out here in that pathetic little frigate? Fuel ain’t cheap, and I know your last few jobs haven’t covered even that much.”

“That’s a real interesting story, Gantok. Let’s say we do have a way past the security barrier. What’s it to you? Scavenger’s code says we get first crack, and you don’t get to interfere,” the captain retorted, the slightest waver leaking into her tone. The Marbok leaned toward the screen to deliver a predatory smile.

“Is that what you’re going to hide behind?” the Marbok said, laughing. Someone off screen joined in. “The code doesn’t mean anything, unless someone involves a magistrate. You’re not important enough for them to even fly out here, and you know it. Let me tell you how this is going to go. You’re going to land, and that little worm is going to open the security gate. Then, once I have confirmation it’s down, I’m going to dock. That’s your chance, Tysha. If you’re smart, you’ll leave the worm behind and get back on your ship. We get the Spire, and you get to live. I’m a fair man, after all.”

Wes shot the captain a tense glance. Would they fight? If the ship could barely fly it was unlikely to do them any good in a firefight, especially against the Marbok. They were known for being tough, and that extended to their vessels.

“Okay,” the captain said, shrugging. “We’ll dock now, and try to get the security grid down. Once we do, my crew is out of here. You get the kid, and you get the Spire. It sucks, but you know you’ve got me. We can’t win in a fight.”

“Very wise, Captain,” the Marbok said, giving a rocky grin. The call was terminated, and the screen went dark.

“You’re, uh, going to turn me over?” Wes asked, suddenly cold. It wasn’t like he could stop them from doing whatever they wanted.

“There’s no way we’re turning over a member of this crew,” the captain said, eyes flashing. “We need to play for time. The Marbok will kill us regardless of what we do. There’s no way they’ll risk us going back and telling people the Spire is open.”

“So what do we do?” Wes asked.

“We get down there and open the security grid. Then we either hope that we can close it behind us, or find some lostek to defend ourselves with,” the captain said, grimly.

Wes raised a hand to his chest, feeling the amulet under his shirt.

5

Wes had his first real look at the Spire from the tiny window in the airlock door. The snowy white structure grew larger, dwarfing their little vessel as they approached. The place was massive, large enough to house thousands of people. It floated alone, hovering above an orange world he’d seen many times over holo, a hot gas planet ringed with a maze of debris. Derelict ships and hunks of rock floated slowly in orbit, though the space around the spire itself was empty of either.

He recognized the emerald curtain of energy enveloping the spire in a protective bubble; the veil the Elderi had called it. It established a breathable atmosphere, and protected the Spire from collisions.

Shirley inched toward the Spire, shuddering when they finally passed through the veil. Wes peered through the window, mouth falling open as they approached. The structure was magnificent.

“Tantor, you’re the only one who can slow the Marbok down, if it comes to that,” the captain said. She turned to the Melter, who hadn’t spoken since the Marbok had contacted them. The big man nodded at Tysha, still silent. “We’ll do our best to screen you, but have that psi-blade ready.” He nodded again.

“Sadie, I want you to assist the kid with anything he might need,” the captain ordered. Then she turned to Wes, clapping him on the shoulder. “And you’re going to get that door open. We’ll stay out of your way, but I have no idea how long we can keep the Marbok off our backs. If we’re lucky, they’ll really wait until you open the door. From there it’s a race. You need to get inside and... well do something to save our collective asses. Find a weapon, or a way to lock the door behind us.”

“If we do that won’t they blow up the ship?” Sadie asked.

“Better it than us,” the captain shot back. “I’d prefer to find

weapons, but we can't really predict what might be in there. We need to be adaptable."

The ship shuddered to a halt, then a metallic pinging began from deep within. Wes looked up in alarm, but Sadie touched him on the shoulder. "It's okay. Reactor's just cooling off. I dropped power a couple minutes ago and we're just coasting in."

"Atmosphere verified," Kestrel's disembodied voice came from the speakers. "You're good to go. Try not to get killed. Also, find something to make us rich."

"All right, let's go," the captain said, slamming the square red button next to the airlock. It ground slowly upward, just as it had when they'd entered. It stopped in roughly the same spot, too.

The captain ducked through, then Tantor. Sadie came next, and Wes hesitantly brought up the rear. He'd never been in a situation quite like this, and being assailed by the Marbok certainly had no place in the victory he'd always fantasized about. What if he couldn't get the security door to lower? They'd probably all die. Hell, they might die even if he did get it down.

Gravity was lower than he was used to, and Wes tried to imitate the others as they bounded toward the security barrier. It was a curtain of green energy much like the one they'd passed through, though this one was brighter, and by all accounts impenetrable. Directly over the barrier was a sigil identical to the one on the amulet. That seemed promising.

"Now what?" the captain asked, turning to Wes.

"Give me a minute," Wes said, studying the sigil. He darted a glance at Tantor. "And no looming. I need to concentrate."

6

Beyond the curtain Wes could see a pair of doors, and over them the Elderi sigil for one. It seemed simple enough, this was the first floor and that was probably the transport that led to the rest of the facility. That much had also been well documented.

"El dahi, con veritat," a voice said, emanating from the doorway or somewhere near it.

"What's it saying?" the captain asked, craning her neck to try to get a better look through the energy barrier.

"I'm hardly an expert in Elderi, but roughly translated it means 'speak the oath,'" he replied. Wes withdrew his amulet, turning it over to study the symbols there. He held them up for the captain's inspection. "I'm hoping that *this* is the oath. I don't know what the words mean, not all of them anyway. But I can pronounce them at

least."

So he did. Wes intoned the words with as much grandeur as he could, in case that helped somehow.

His words died away, and Wes held his breath while he waited. Nothing happened.

"Are you sure you said them right?" Tantor asked, looming again.

"I'm positive," Wes snapped, holding the amulet close to his face. He adjusted his glasses. Had he missed something?

The amulet grew warmer. Then it became hot. Light flared, then the amulet shot from his hand, directly at his chest. Wes tried to fall back, but the amulet moved in a blur. Heat suffused his chest as it disappeared inside of him. He could feel it there, like a hot coal. Yet his skin was unbroken. His duster hadn't been damaged either.

"What the hell was that?" the captain asked.

Wes sagged to his knees, catching himself against Sadie. The pain was excruciating, shooting through every part of his body. His entire nervous system burned, and he had no idea why. No idea what this thing was doing to him. Fear and pain fought to overwhelm his senses, but he held on. Whatever it was had been designed for the Elderi. Would it even work on a human?

Then the pain ceased. Wes collapsed bonelessly to the warm metal floor, conscious of a little drool leaking from the corner of his mouth. Sadie's beautiful face appeared next to his, eyes large with concern.

"Wes?" she said, lightly shaking him.

"Sss good," he said, forcing himself to sit up. And he was good. He felt like he'd just had the most incredible night's sleep, followed by a cup of the very best espresso Capital had to offer. Wes wiped the drool from his chin.

"The barrier is down," the captain said, something approaching wonder coloring her voice. It was the first real emotion Wes had seen from her, and he shared it. Then her expression tightened, and Tysha withdrew her shotgun from her thigh holster. "Clock is ticking even faster now. The Marbok will have detected the energy drop."

Wes knew they were in a hurry, but he couldn't help it. He stared down the hallway in awe, realizing that they were likely the first people to see beyond this point since the Elderi had vanished seven millennia ago. He'd dreamed of this moment since he'd first entered university.

"Aww, crap," Tantor said, turning to face the way they'd come.

Wes accepted Sadie's help getting to his feet, then looked to see what was bothering the man. It was clear exactly what had caught his attention, because the Marbok ship was passing through the energy curtain. The bulky vessel was far larger than the Shirley, at least three

hundred meters long. That could hold a lot of cargo, or whole lot of angry Marbok.

The vessel was spherical, with a pair of triangular wings jutting from the midsection. It looked like flying grapefruit. At their current pace they'd be docking in less than two minutes.

"Okay, let's move," the captain barked, shoving Wes toward what he presumed to be a transporter of some kind. "Find me a way to seal the door, or to get us deeper inside the Spire. I don't care which."

"No pressure," Wes muttered, hurrying to the smooth white door. It hissed open at his approach, and he looked inside. The wall was covered in sigils, all dark except for one that looked a lot like his amulet. A quick glance back at the security barrier showed no immediate way to raise it, no control panel or switch. "I'm pretty sure I can get this transporter working. It's similar to the ones on Corentia. I don't see a way to close the door behind us, though."

"Okay, that will have to do. Everybody follow Wes," the captain said, hurrying into the boxy room until she was crowding him. The others arrived a moment later, Tantor and Sadie making the tiny room positively claustrophobic. Wes tapped the sigil that looked like the amulet, uttering a silent prayer to gods he didn't really believe in.

7

A warm tingle passed through his body, and the room's rear wall began to shimmer. It rippled like a pool of water, and when it cleared a sort of portal had opened. On the other side lay what appeared to be a library. The room was lined with shelves, every shelf packed with leather bound books. Plush high-backed chairs dotted the corners, each sitting next to equally ornate end tables.

"Everybody in," the captain said, nudging Wes toward the portal.

Wes stepped through, bracing himself as he broke the portal's plane. He didn't feel a tingle or anything odd, he simply stepped through like it was any other doorway. Wes turned to scan the hallway, looking for a sigil or any other way to close the portal. There was nothing obvious.

"Sadie, you're next," the captain ordered, pushing the petite mechanic toward the portal. She walked toward Wes, wide eyes studying the room. Right up until she bumped into the edge of the portal, like it was a pane of glass.

"Ow," she said, raising a hand to her nose. She blinked, then raised a hand and tried to stick it through the portal. It stopped at the plane, again like it was touching glass. "Looks like you're the only one who can get inside."

“What should I do?” Wes called to the captain.

Tysha glanced behind her, then turned an exasperated look at Wes. “If we can’t come to you, then you need to find something that will help us out here. Look around. Quickly.”

“Uhh,” Wes said, spinning slowly in place as he sought anything that might help. “I see a bunch of books lining the walls, and what looks like a smaller room past this one.”

“Lovely,” the captain snapped. She turned to Tantor. “We’ll try to hold them at the tunnel entrance. Sadie, stay here and keep an eye on Wes. Wes, if you like breathing then you’d better find something useful. We’ll hold them for as long as we can.”

Wes gave a nod, fists balling as he walked quickly into the smaller room beyond the first. The books were interesting, but only if he had time to study them. He needed something practical, and he needed it right now.

The smaller room was also lined with bookshelves, just as the first room had been. They hardly seemed in keeping with a technological behemoth like the Elderi, but evidently they’d liked their hard copies. He was more used to digital books, but the Elderi had been sticklers for tradition, especially antiquated ones.

Two plush chairs sat at the far side of the room, each hovering a little off the floor. Wes had no idea what kept them aloft, no one did. They’d seen it in other Elderi tech, and it had never been duplicated or reverse engineered. Many scientists laughingly called it magic, as it seemed to obey none of the laws of psychics.

It was the pedestal in the center of the room that drew his attention though. Sitting atop it were two silver pistols, exact replicas of those depicted on the sigil outside. They were smaller than his Welks, each a solid piece of metal with a narrow trigger guard. There was no obvious clip, or action. He’d never seen anything like them.

Heat bloomed in Wes as he stared at the weapons, and he *knew* they were meant for him. He walked over to the pedestal, carefully inspecting it from all sides. There didn’t seem to be any traps, and the feeling was growing stronger. Plus, he was out of time. These were weapons, exactly what the captain had asked for.

Wes picked up one of the pistols. A thrill passed through him, an indescribably beautiful feeling. The weapon fit his hand perfectly. It was a part of him in some way he didn’t fully understand. He set the pistol down reluctantly, unbuckling his own weapon and dropping it to the floor. Then he picked up the Elderi belt, buckling the holsters around his waist. Wes drew the second pistol, and picked up the first from the pedestal. The thrill grew stronger. Energy filled him, and he had to suppress a giggle.

“Wes,” Sadie’s panicked voice came from the room beyond.

“You’ve got to hurry. Things aren’t looking good here.”

Wes strode back through the library, pistols at the ready. Sadie was peering at him through the portal, and beyond her Wes could see bright flashes. The telltale *whump* of plasma weaponry mingled with traditional slug fire. Most of the fire came from farther away, from the Marbok, if Wes was any judge.

“You found a couple pistols? I guess that’s something,” Sadie said, looking a little crestfallen.

Wes didn’t answer, the song within him consuming his attention. His body glided along, almost of its own accord. It moved gracefully, a word he’d never, ever have ascribed to himself.

He passed through the portal, then broke into a sprint as he approached the doorway leading back to the hangar. A Marbok body lay just outside, its dull eyes staring unblinkingly at the wall. There wasn’t a mark on him, not that Wes could see anyway.

His holo-honed senses instantly recognized the handiwork of a brain Melter. There was no sign of Tantor, but that wasn’t surprising. Melters could manipulate the minds of others, ensuring that no one noticed them. It made them all but invisible, and was part of why they were the favorite assassins of every noble house.

“Don’t just stand there. Do something,” Sadie said, dropping into a crouch and shielding herself with her arms.

So Wes did. He glided past the captain, who was using the doorway as cover. Six Marbok were fanned out across the hangar, each cradling a long barreled weapon. Those barrels pointed in Wes’s direction, and an instant later they began to boom.

8

His eyes widened as the rifles began to boom. Wes was positive he was dead.

To his immense surprise, Wes dove into a roll. He tucked his shoulder, using his momentum to catapult back to his feet. Bullets ricocheted from the deck with echoing pings, mere inches away. The Marbok began adjusting their aim, turning like they were stuck in molasses.

Wes had all the time in the world. His arms rose of their own accord, each pistol aimed at the Marbok on either end of their semicircle. Wes’s fingers caressed each trigger, and he walked the silver weapons down the entire line of rocky adversaries. Bolts of green-blue burst from the weapons, catching each Marbok in the face. They were knocked back like boka pins, flung across the deck to land in heaps. None rose.

Another group charged out of the vessel, nearly a dozen. Gantok stood in the back, an enormous axe cradled in one hand. Wes was gripped by the kind of terror he'd not experienced since he used to wet the bed. He was moving *toward* them, instead of running like any sane man. His body glided into motion, rolling forward and using one of the downed Marbok as cover. Wes fired off a volley, the silver pistols bucking slightly as he filled the air with green-blue bolts. Four Marbok slumped to the deck, enraging the rest.

Wes ducked back behind cover, or rather whatever force was controlling his body did. Bullets thudded into the Marbok corpse, then a loud thump as a plasma bolt shot into the thing. The scent of cooked flesh made his eyes water, but Wes' body didn't seem to care. It leapt from cover, rolling to the right. Several shots cracked, all going wide. Then Wes was up again, sprinting forward.

He leapt into the air, kicking off the corpse of a downed Marbok. That gave him the high ground, not just pulling him from the line of fire, but giving him the perfect perspective to rain death on his opponents. He drifted like a kite, sailing slowly over them. The Marbok moved in slow motion, their gravelly voices barking elongated orders. Wes gunned them down without mercy, firing a rapid stream of pulses with impossible accuracy. The Marbok toppled to the deck like toys that had run out of power.

All except for Gantok.

"Wait a minute, kid," the Marbok said, dropping his axe to the deck. "We can—"

Wes's arm shot up, the pistol aligning with the Marbok's face. It fired before he could even register what was happening. Gantok's headless body tumbled to the deck. He stared numbly, shocked by the entire event.

"Huh," the captain said, raising an eyebrow as she stared at the pile of bodies. She rose slowly from cover, walking cautiously in his direction. Tysha actually smiled. "What the nebulas did I just see?"

"Honestly? I have no idea," Wes said, eyeing his pistols with wonder. "These things are amazing. Clearly they're more than just guns."

"Clearly. They're made from virilium, what the Elderi called starmetal." Sadie approached cautiously. She stared at one of the pistols, fascinated. "Can I see one?"

"Sure." Wes offered the weapon to her.

"Ow," she snapped, dropping it to the deck the moment her fingers closed around it. "It shocked me."

"This may be the funniest thing I've ever seen," Tantor said, looming behind Wes. It was just as terrifying as it had been in the ship, pistols or not. The big man smiled. "I'm betting the weapons are

keyed to the kid somehow. We all saw what happened to the amulet. I think our archeologist took the Elderi course on becoming a certified badass."

Before Wes could respond the pistols grew hot in his hands, then they began to vibrate. There was a bright flash and they simply disappeared. He could *feel* them inside his body somehow. "Well that's certainly handy."

"Yeah, wonderful. Disappearing guns," Tysha said, all business again. "Here's the thing. If nobody can touch them, then we can't sell them. How much are those books worth? Please say a lot, because we don't quite have enough fuel to make it to the closest station."

Wes clamped his mouth shut for a moment. Those books were priceless. Beyond priceless. Even if they were copies of existing works, they'd still be immensely valuable. But if they were undiscovered titles? Houses might kill to posses them.

"Not terribly valuable I'm afraid," Wes said, giving an exaggerated sigh.

"At least we're alive," Sadie said, grinning.

"Yeah, but we are, once again, walking away with nothing," Tysha said, a glower descending. Tantor matched the expression.

"I'm not sure about that, Captain," Wes said, nudging her in the shoulder. He pointed at the Marbok vessel. "How do you feel about upgrading your ship?"

Tysha met his gaze, and smiled. "I have a feeling your life is about to get a whole lot more interesting."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Wes said, smiling back. "Shall we?"

Q&A with Chris Fox

What inspired you to become an author?

I did it to impress a girl. We're getting married so I think it worked. ;)

What's a typical writing day like?

My writing is usually done by 11 a.m., and I tend to write in 20 minute sprints until I hit my 5,000 word goal.

Who is your favorite author?

Robert Jordan, because he inspired me to want to create my own worlds, then pissed me off enough to actually do it.

Where do you get your ideas?

I find that putting myself in solitude generates all sorts of great questions, and answering them leads to stories. What if there was an advanced culture that we know nothing about? What if aliens landed tomorrow?

You sure have a cool last name.

Yet somehow people still misspell it.

If you need to reach me I can be found at chris@chrisfoxwrites.com. I'd love to hear from you!

By day, I am an iPhone developer architecting the app used to scope Stephen Colbert's ear. By night, I am Batman. Okay... maybe not. One can dream though, right?

I've been writing since I was six years old, and started inflicting my work on others at age 18. By age 24 people stopped running away when I approached them with a new story, and shortly thereafter I published my first one in the Rifter.

Wait—you're still reading?

Ok, the facts I'm supposed to list in a bio. As of this writing I'm 38 years old and live just north of the Golden Gate Bridge in the beautiful town of Mill Valley. If you're unsure how to find it, just follow the smell of self-entitlement. Once you see the teens driving Teslas you'll know you're in the right place.

I live in a tiny studio that I can cross in (literally) five steps and don't own an oven. But you know what? It's worth it. I love developing iPhone apps and if you want to work in San Francisco you accept that rent for a tiny place costs more than most people's mortgage.

If you and about 2 million other people start buying my books I promise to move out of Marin to a house in the redwoods up in Guerneville. No pressure. Wait, that's a lie. Pressure.

Procurement
by *Adam Quinn*

CAPTAIN JAREYN BROOK swiped through the notes scribbled on her palm-sized personal screen as she walked. “All right, JP, let’s take this from the top—should I say ‘mistakes were made *and therefore* the ship is not recoverable,’ or ‘the ship is not recoverable *because* mistakes were made’?”

“Neither.” Her dark-blue-skinned Archavian companion shook his elongated head. “’Mistake’ is a subjective term—one person’s mistake is another person’s tragic inevitability. Once you step into that committee chamber, you are that second person.”

“Got it.” Brook smiled, not least because JP had not responded to her use of his nickname. She had thought herself quite clever when she discovered that the initials of her political liaison officer spelled out the abbreviation for “Justice of the Peace,” a position which JP’s exhaustive knowledge of Meltian Republic law undoubtedly qualified him for. “So, how long is it going to take them to set us up with a replacement for the *Kindred Spirit*?”

JP had assured her that this was a routine process—talk to some committee here on Meltia, get their rubber stamp, and walk away with a shiny new starship—but every minute this process took was time that her crew was sitting around in some hotel in the Erian solar system instead of traversing the galaxy, saving lives like the Interstellar Emergency Service was supposed to do.

JP looked up at her, spreading his arms in a gesture of uncertainty—though average height for his species, he stood almost half a meter shorter than her. “Not as long as it took to retrieve the *Spirit* after you got it impounded on Walletarde.”

“Hey, now, if they didn’t want us in that shipyard, they should have posted signs,” Brook said.

“In space?” JP asked.

“Or something like that. Anyway, that was Walletarde; this is Meltia.” Brook waved her arm at the floor-to-ceiling windows that dominated one wall of the corridor, affording an exquisite view of the capital city of Telahmir. “As far as I can tell, bureaucracy is this planet’s official sport. And don’t tell me they’ll break the rules for us.”

“Break? No. Bend? Perhaps, if you motivate them to do so.” JP aimed an elongated blue finger at her chest. “Bureaucracy is only obstructive to the uninitiated. To the experienced—including those on this committee—it provides opportunities.”

A half-formed laugh hissed between Brook’s lips as they arrived at

the committee's chamber. "Whatever you say, JP. Just make sure we have all the boxes checked so we can roll—or preferably fly—on out of here after this." The IES was a popular agency with the Meltian people, so there was no way this committee would deny her request outright, but if they wanted to make her life difficult, the Meltian bureaucracy provided far more "opportunities" to slow things down than to speed them up. That was part of the reason she lobbied the Emergency Service to create the IES in the first place: with a single starship, a small budget, and galactic purview, she could run her little agency without Meltian bureaucrats constantly looking over her shoulder. In fact, she was pretty sure this was her first time on the Republic's capital world since that initial lobbying tour, four years ago.

On the wall outside the committee's chamber, an engraved panel read, "Meltian Republic Legislature Subcommittee on Internal Procurements." Below it was a screen listing the committee's docket—she was right on time. She placed her hand on the door, an ancient thing that swung on metal hinges.

"Remember," JP said, "this committee is not yet aware that the *Spirit* is no longer operational. As far as they know, we are here to make an ordinary procurement request. Make sure that before you acknowledge that fact—"

"I frame the question in a manner that appeals to their self-interest. I've got this, JP." Brook gave the archaic door a push, and a groaning, creaking noise accompanied its opening. By the time she closed it behind her, the committee chamber was silent, and every pair of eyes in the room—plus the third eye of one non-human representative—was focused on her.

In total, there were nine representatives seated behind a severe semicircular metal desk, each identified by a nameplate and attended to by at least one aide. There was a lectern in the center of the committee's long desk, so Brook strode toward that, smiling out at her observably unreceptive audience. "Good afternoon! So, how has everyone's day been so far?"

"Welcome, Captain Brook." Representative Divar, a human with glossy shoulder-length black hair, sat at the midpoint of the semicircle, so Brook assumed he was the chairman, or whatever Legislature Subcommittees had. "You may begin your appeal."

Brook winced inwardly as she assumed her position behind the lectern. "Appeal" made it sound like she was some kind of criminal. "Thank you, Mr. Divar. I'm here today to let you all know about an opportunity by which this committee could demonstrate its support for the Interstellar Emergency Service, which, as you all undoubtedly know, is a very popular agency with the Meltian public."

“Captain Brook,” Representative Divar said, “how was the *Kindred Spirit* destroyed?”

That stopped Brook cold. She still had almost three minutes of JP-written introduction before she was supposed to so much as hint at the fact that the *Kindred Spirit* was no longer in service.

“Right,” Brook said. “Funny story, that.”

Divar glared at her.

“Not funny. A very serious story.” Brook scrolled to her notes about the incident itself. “So, the IES has monitoring probes across the galaxy, orbiting stars that are likely to go supernova. They’re pretty dumb probes, just taking sensor readings of their star and slowly changing their orbital inclination so they get the full picture over time. Anyway, one of these probes smacked into a station owned by Griffin Space Technologies.” There was a disclaimer scribbled in the margins of her notes. “Now, for the record, let me note that space is very, very big, and our probes are very, very small, so there is no way this would have happened if they had not been intentionally following our probe, and let me also note that this GST station was completely unregistered and actually used scanner-jamming technology, so there was no way we could have avoided this accident.”

The members of the committee did not seem very impressed. In fact, eight of them still looked downright hostile, while the other—a woman in a light blue cape—just looked confused. Time to turn this around, lest Brook be compelled to jump through *all* the bureaucratic hoops before she got her new ship.

“But we’re not traffic cops, we’re the Emergency Service.” Brook gave the committee a warm smile. “So when this unregistered station calls up and says they’ve lost their flip drive and thrusters—stranding them in orbit around the maybe-supernova—we swoop in to save the day. Unfortunately, since they were already unsafely close to the star, the probe collision put them on a course to get an unpleasant solar haircut, so we had to get them out fast. We wanted to evacuate them, but they wouldn’t leave their precious space station, and we couldn’t fit it inside our hangars, so we had to basically strap them to the nose of the *Spirit* and strain our own flip drive to push them away. Unfortunately, the load was too much, and our flip drive... basically exploded. On the bright side, we managed to get everyone—even the GST people—onto lifeboats before we sprayed the Erian system with chunks of *Kindred Spirit*.”

Perhaps “chunks of *Kindred Spirit*” was not the most positive image to end on. Brook added, “I think providing for such a *popular* agency to acquire a new ship...” She glanced at her notes, plucking a few choice words from JP’s introduction. “...is an uncontroversial and pan-partisan objective. Any questions?”

The woman in the blue cape—Representative Arriet—looked like she was about to say something when Divar cut her off. “This committee has everything it needs to deliberate on this appeal.”

What? JP had told her she would spend the majority of her time fielding questions from the representatives.

Divar rested his elbows on the desk, steepling his hands. “With the committee’s assent, we will move to a vote on whether to grant Captain Brook her ship. Those in favor?”

Seven of his colleagues raised their fingers in assent.

Arriet folded her arms. “What are you doing, Divar?”

Divar gave her a confused glance, but then shook his head and turned back to Brook. “This committee is now called to a vote. Captain Brook, you may leave the chamber.”

Now was probably not a good time to upset Divar further. Whatever she had done to upset him in the first place. Brook found JP waiting outside the chamber.

“How did it go?” he asked.

“They knew,” Brook said. “They knew the *Spirit* was destroyed before I said a word.”

JP’s black eyes narrowed, but before he could respond, an aide opened the door with another calamitous groan. “Captain Brook.”

That didn’t take long.

When Brook followed the aide back inside, she found Arriet giving Divar a distasteful look. Divar seemed to be ignoring his fellow representative.

“Captain Brook,” he said, “this committee has voted to deny your appeal.”

Brook opened her mouth, but she had somehow forgotten to breathe. After sucking in a quick breath, she said, “Mr. Divar, we are the *Interstellar* Emergency Service. We can’t operate without a ship.”

“That is true,” Divar said. “The IES will be forced to temporarily pause their activities. We will ensure that proper paperwork is delivered to the headquarters of the Meltian Republic Emergency Service here in Telahmir, at which point they will have the option to either absorb current IES employees into their main organization or furlough them.”

Brook maintained her composure even as Divar’s words wrenched open a hole in her gut. Sure, the operation hadn’t gone perfectly, but sacrificing the *Spirit* enabled her to ensure the safety of hundreds of lives—both those of the GST employees and of her own crew. And as her reward, this committee was taking her command. They were killing the IES, which she had brought to life and nurtured into an organization that did a tremendous amount of good for the Republic and the galaxy.

“Captain Brook, you may leave the chamber.”

“Thank you all for your consideration.” Brook relinquished the lectern and departed the committee’s chambers.

Outside, JP asked, “What happened?”

“Nothing good,” Brook said, but she stopped herself before she gave JP a full rundown of the committee’s verdict. The IES did not need a captain to complain about its problems—it needed one to come up with its solutions. Brook might not have those solutions in hand just yet, but all that meant was that she and JP had their work cut out for them. After all, she had given birth to the IES—she was not about to let it die.

“How long would it take to get the paperwork together to shut down the IES?” Brook asked.

“Two days, if one works efficiently,” JP said.

Brook nodded. “Then that’s how much time we have to find a way around this committee.”

JP’s eyes widened in comprehension. “I see.” Though the IES was never JP’s brainchild, he had been the Emergency Service administrator in charge of reviewing her petition to create it, so he was at least a midwife.

Brook clasped her hands behind her back and began to pace. They still had to figure out how to obtain a ship—there were just a few more variables in play now. Beyond the window-dominated wall opposite the committee chamber, Meltia’s star was visible, casting progressively longer shadows as it sank toward the horizon. Any other modern city would be swarmed by hovercars, but Telahmir’s pedestrian culture meant that only a handful flitted across the skyline. The tranquility of the capital’s airspace mocked the intensity of Brook’s thoughts.

JP said, “Their order to shut down the IES will list our lack of a vessel in its preamble as a justification. If we could prove that condition invalid—by acquiring a ship—we could petition the Emergency Service to contest the order, preventing it from taking effect.”

“Makes sense.” In truth, Brook hadn’t realized there was a possibility that the committee’s orders might take effect even if they were to find a ship. But that was why she had JP. “Anyway, I think we need to figure out why they denied us in the first place—I mean, we *are* a popular organization, right? Yet they all seemed to hate us. Except for… I need to talk to someone.”

Brook abruptly turned back toward the committee’s chambers and was about to push on the door when it swung open from the inside.

Representative Arriet’s eyes were fiery as she closed the door behind her, but Brook immediately got the sense that the

representative's anger was not directed at her.

"We have *hundreds* of ships," Arriet said. "Hundreds of inactive vessels in orbit around Meltia, left over from the Order War. We've given them to agencies with a tenth of the distinction of the IES. We've sold the older ones as scrap metal. You should have gotten one."

Brook blinked. "Yes. I agree. Why didn't I?"

"I don't know," Arriet said. "Divar and the others—they were acting so strangely. Like they knew something I didn't."

Brook spread her arms. "We have nothing to hide. Is there any way you could figure out why they were so hostile?"

"Perhaps." Arriet threw a glance back at the committee chamber. "But only if Divar doesn't realize I'm helping you. He was very upset I did not vote with the majority. Meet one of my aides tomorrow at the center of Freedom Square, 7:00 Standard Time. Do not wear your uniform."

"I'll be there." Brook glanced at JP.

"I will look into alternative—"

JP cut himself off as the committee's door offered up its characteristic squeal—if that awful thing had any benefit, it was that nobody could sneak up on them through it.

An aide stood in the doorway. "Representative Arriet?"

Brook folded her arms and glared at Arriet. "I don't care what *you* voted for—your committee killed my agency. So why don't you go scurrying back to them, politician?" The resentment was not difficult to fake.

Arriet shot a haughty look back at Brook. "Well, then, I apologize for trying to help you. It's quite clear you don't deserve it."

Representative Arriet turned and strode back into the committee chamber, the outmoded door screeching like the metaphorical cogs of bureaucracy itself.

* * *

"What in the galaxy is that?" Representative Arriet scrutinized Brook's double breasted crimson leather jacket as the IES captain stepped into Arriet's office. The aide who had met Brook at Freedom Square let himself out.

"Until recently, I lived on a starship," Brook said. "Didn't have anything but IES black. So we had to go shopping—and I was told this was high fashion on Meltia."

"That it is," Arriet said, "but my intention was for you to be inconspicuous. Did you see any other committee members on your

way in?"

"No one at all," Brook said. "Your aide brought me in through some back entrance. Are they looking for me?"

"They shouldn't be, but we don't want to give them ideas." Arriet shook her head, pulling a personal screen from a compartment in her desk. "Especially now that I've found the source of your problems."

Brook reached out to take the screen. It displayed a document with a block font heading that tightened the grip of her hands around the device: "THE IES: IRRESPONSIBLE AND UNACCOUNTABLE." Below the title was the logo of the Telahmir Report, a major Meltian news agency.

"Why have I never seen this before?" Brook asked. JP kept tabs on news articles concerning the IES—surely this would have come to his attention.

"As far as I know, only a handful of copies were ever distributed—all of them to Divar and the other members of our subcommittee. I didn't know about it myself until I sent my aides to do some digging—I suspect they did not send it to me because they knew I would see through it."

Brook swiped past the table of contents to the main body of the text, skimming the first page. Every paragraph presented a new example of how the IES—and by extension, Brook—pursued their mission with reckless abandon, causing hundreds of civilian casualties in the process. The facts would be shocking if not for the fact that every single one of them was false.

"This is nonsense." Brook felt her face heat as she tossed the screen onto Arriet's desk, stabbing her finger at a particularly offending example. "Frinid isn't even part of the Meltian Republic—the IES has never been there, much less burned down one of their cities. I can't believe the Telahmir Report distributed this."

"I can," Arriet said. "Divar may not have realized this since he is a relatively new representative, but there are few reporters left in Telahmir who cannot be bought for a sufficient sum. To distribute a few copies of a report on a niche issue? I bet the purchaser did not even pay very much."

"Then who's the purchaser?" Brook asked.

"An enemy of the IES."

"We're part of the Emergency Service," Brook said. "We save people. We don't have any..."

Arriet prompted Brook with a raised eyebrow—a trademarked politician's gesture if there ever was one.

Brook eased herself into one of the chairs in front of Arriet's desk, resting her forearms on the ornately patterned platinumwood surface. "I told the committee we got everyone onto lifeboats when our flip

drive overloaded—and that was the truth. What I... did not emphasize was the fact that in doing so, we left the Griffin Space Technologies station behind. It was ripped apart with the *Kindred Spirit*. The Emergency Service compensated them, of course, but that didn't stop Charles Griffin himself from publicly denouncing the IES. I thought he was irrationally angry over the loss of a small station like that, when he's so rich, and he even got compensated for it, but if the IES has an enemy, it's him."

Brook's certainty grew as she said it out loud. Griffin had a reputation for double-dealing in the business world and meddling in the political sphere; she was fortunate not to have encountered his company previously while serving as Captain of the IES, but there were rumors that Griffin made a fortune during the Order War by selling starships to both sides of the conflict. A petty retaliation like this would not be beneath him, and he certainly had the money to pull it off. The only question was what to do now.

Arriet seemed to agree, judging from her thoughtful nod. "In theory, this matter should be referred to a court or to the Subcommittee on Ethical Business Practices."

Brook noted Arriet's qualification. "And in practice?"

"You may not have the necessary amount of time."

Brook knew Arriet was right—nearly two weeks had passed between the incident with the GST station and her committee hearing, and she had been lucky to get an appointment that quickly. Two weeks from now, the dismantlement of the IES would be well underway, its assets sold off, and its crew dispersed across the galaxy. Returning to operational status could easily take five or six months. If another space station fell into a star during that time, or a new epidemic spread across the shipping routes, or a new terror cell emerged... the bureaucrats in charge of the regular Emergency Service would do something *eventually*, but not with half the speed and agility of the IES.

Brook frowned at the report on Arriet's desk. JP had been right, in a way. The bureaucracy *could* provide opportunities—if one were Charles Griffin. If one were an honest captain trying to save her command from a spiteful trillionaire, not so much.

Whatever delusions JP had, it was clear they were heading toward a dead end. The system of arbitrary rules that governed this planet's bureaucracy was the glove on her fist—or maybe the pair of handcuffs binding her wrists behind her back; if she wasn't willing to fight without them, she might as well admit defeat now. Had the stakes been lower, she would have considered doing so—for JP's sake, if nothing else—but to give up now was to be the captain who sacrificed the IES on the altar of bureaucratic procedure.

And that was not Captain Jareyn Brook.

“You’re right.” She stood. “Time is not on our side. But I have a plan.” Brook took the personal screen with the offending document and strode out of Arriet’s office.

Maybe “plan” was a bit of an exaggeration.

Brook knew she needed to prove Griffin had paid for the document to be distributed, and she figured the first step toward that was to trace its delivery to the other representatives.

Arriet’s office was close to the front of the complex in which it resided, so Brook first made her way to the reception desk, attended to by a woman whose nametag identified her as Abigail Igoru.

“Hi!” Brook extended her arm to shake Igoru’s hand. “I’m supposed to bring a copy of this document to Representative Divar’s office, but I think he may have already received a copy. Can you message ahead and check? The title is: ‘The IES: Irresponsible and Unaccountable.’”

“Certainly, Ma’am,” Igoru said. “Or you could deliver it to them yourself. Divar’s office is number... five twenty-four.”

Brook smiled. “Why don’t we do both? If no one’s there, maybe one of his aides will still respond to his Interplanetary Network Address.”

“Of course, Ma’am,” Igoru said.

“Also,” Brook said, “do you have a coat check?”

Five minutes later, wearing a gray overcoat from the coat check’s lost and found, Brook arrived at office number five twenty-four.

A single male aide sat behind what she assumed was Divar’s desk. He looked up as she entered. “How can I help you, Ma’am?”

“Abigail Igoru.” The name spilled out of Brook’s mouth as she shook the aide’s hand. “From the reception desk,” she hastily followed up. “I was wondering if you got my message?”

The aide gave her a scrutinizing look. Brook froze —impersonating a government official was probably something that was frowned upon in Telahmir. In fact, it might be a misdemeanor.

“Did you... get a new haircut, Abigail?” the aide asked.

There was still time to claim a slip of the tongue—but Brook did not. Surely borrowing the name of a receptionist paled in comparison to Griffin’s outright bribery, and if she wanted to win this bureaucratic tussle, she could not afford to be squeamish about such small things. At any rate, this man clearly did not interact closely with Igoru if he was tempted to confuse her with an IES captain twenty years her senior. Brook dialed up the intensity of her smile. “I did—thanks for noticing!”

The aide returned the smile before looking back at the computer workstation embedded in Divar’s desk. “Ah, I have your message here.

Yeah, turns out we did get a copy of that document a few days ago."

A few days ago. That would place it just a day or two before her hearing. The other representatives must have deeply trusted the Telahmir Report's impartiality to not recognize such an obvious attempt to undermine Brook. Perhaps if her investigation disabused them of that trust, this sort of thing would not happen again.

"For our records," Brook said, "I need the time, date, and manner of delivery, to the best of your memory."

The aide scratched his head. "Well, I remember it was hand-delivered—that was odd—and it was... I don't know, about 3:00 ST, two days ago? Actually, now that I think about it, it's probably on security footage downstairs."

Brook constrained her excitement—security footage would be excellent, but a Meltian bureaucrat would not be *excited* to do more legwork in pursuit of trivial records.

"I'll check that out, but..." Brook let her face fall into a frown. "Could you call ahead for me? Last time I tried to get something from them, they didn't seem to want me around at all."

The aide gave her a sympathetic smile. "They're like that to everyone. I'll let them know you're coming."

Brook grinned. "Thanks!"

Brook took an elevator to the basement of the complex. Upon exiting the elevator car, she was stopped by a bored-looking security guard.

"This is a restricted area, Ma'am. May I please see your identification?"

Identification? Brook made a show of patting her pockets before coming up empty. She shrugged apologetically. "Must have left it somewhere, sorry—but I'm Abigail Igoru. Representative Divar's office should have told you I was coming."

The guard pulled a small personal screen out of his pocket. Brook clasped her hands behind her back, masking her uncertainty.

"Huh." He regarded her again. "I guess you're okay. Says you're here to look at video records."

"That's right," Brook said. "Can you help me with that? I need the security video of Representative Divar's office starting 2:30 ST two days ago."

The guard grabbed a transceiver from his belt. "Yeah, hey, this is Roth, I need someone to relieve me out here. Yes, really. No, I need to escort someone to the camera room."

Roth led her down the hall—a bare concrete and metal affair that seemed far removed from the offices above—until they reached a dark doorway. Inside, three floor-to-ceiling screens dominated the wall space, each split into sections with views from various cameras and

attended by a guard dressed similarly to Roth.

"Hey, Roth," one of them said. "Who's this?"

"Name's Abigail Igoru," Roth said. "One of the Reps sent her down to look at the record from two days ago at 2:30."

"Office five twenty-four," Brook said. "Also, if we do find something, is there any way we could pull the image off this system and send it over the network—or store it on a datacard?"

The next step, Brook figured, was to run facial recognition on whoever delivered the document. The Emergency Service had some powerful video analysis software they used on footage of terror attacks.

The wall screen officer gave her a funny look. "That's an unusual request."

This one wasn't quite as gullible as the others.

"Is it?" Brook asked innocently. "Representative Divar wants to know for sure who was in his office at that time."

"He does, does he?" the wall screen officer asked. "What did you say your name was?"

"Abigail Igoru," Brook said.

She noticed too late that the security cameras monitoring the building tagged by name the government employees that walked in front of their view—and one camera was pointed directly at the reception desk.

The guard pointed at that camera view. "*That* Abigail Igoru?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Brook saw Roth reach for the stun baton on his belt.

"Oh!" Brook said. "That's my daughter, Abigail Igoru Jr."

The age difference was a little too small, but Brook figured it was at least plausible.

"You don't even resemble each other," Roth said.

"She has her father's hair," Brook said.

The wall screen officer tapped the reception desk view and scrolled backward in time to when Brook approached the desk. "She doesn't seem to recognize you."

"My husband and I divorced when Abigail was two. She lives with her father now."

By now every guard in the room was looking at them—and they all seemed to be losing patience. Brook's pulse quickened. There was never a good time to be arrested, but now—with the future of the IES depending on her—was especially bad. "Look," Brook said, "this is extremely important—I can explain it to you later, but right now—"

Roth laid a hand on her shoulder. "You can explain it to a judge."

Not in time to save the IES, she couldn't. Brook's muscles tensed at Roth's touch—working for the IES, even as its captain, tended to

keep one fit, and she could probably evade these guards, but for what? Ironically, they would track her down with the very security systems she had hoped to exploit, and then she would be charged with evading arrest on top of impersonating a public official.

Brook felt a trickle of defeat seeping into her body. She took a slow breath in and expelled that insidious emotion with her exhalation. The fight wasn't done until the Emergency Service signed off on that dismantlement order, or she stopped fighting, and neither of those was happening right now—this arrest just added a few more variables to the problem.

Brook raised her arms. "Well then, let's go."

* * *

Brook was pacing up and down the small holding cell when the door opened. As she turned, her stomach hoped she would see a police officer with her morning meal—instead, she found an even more agreeable sight.

"JP!" Brook's initial enthusiasm was dampened by his stoic expression. "They wouldn't let me contact you; what's going on out there?"

"Let's go, Captain," JP said.

Brook leaned out of the holding cell. No police officer accompanied him. "JP, are you breaking me out?"

"No." He tossed her a skeptical look as he led her out of the cell. "I used a clause of the Emergency Service's boilerplate employment contract to ensure your maximum sentence was commuted to a token fine, which enabled me to settle the case out of court for a small sum."

"Oh," Brook said. "Thanks."

JP did not answer. They reached the front of the detention center in which Brook had been held and strode out the door into the Meltian sunlight.

Brook frowned. JP always chose his words carefully, but he was never recalcitrant. "What's going on? What happened to the dismantlement order? Did you find another legal route?"

"The committee has drafted the dismantlement order. Meltian law requires it to be delivered by a Legislature representative, a process which is undoubtedly underway."

So they did not have much time left. Brook was concerned by JP's apparent lack of urgency. "And did you find a way to stop them?"

JP stopped in the middle of the brick street in front of the detention center. The bright sunlight glinted off his bald, midnight blue head. "It is difficult to open doors in the legal system when the

leader of the organization one represents is in jail."

Oh. Right. "Sorry about that. I guess we need to come up with a new plan."

"Your plan, I should hope," JP said, "is to refrain from repeating the recklessness that resulted in your arrest. My plan is to find new employment."

JP turned and began to walk away. The defeat that Brook had deflected before now flooded back. She did not care what Charles Griffin or Representative Divar or even Roth the elevator guard thought of her choices. They had their own agendas. But JP had dedicated himself to restoring the IES, even when she made his job difficult. He had come back to help her out, despite the fact that she blatantly violated his code of ethics.

Wait. By "help her out," she meant that he had sprung her from jail—whether he liked that terminology or not—a feat that she would not have thought possible until he did it. A feat that *would* have been impossible for her, whether she followed the law in the traditional manner or cast it aside, and which was only possible for JP because of his ability to manipulate that law to his advantage.

"JP, wait!" Brook smiled bitterly—how ironic that JP was the one to walk away when he was the one with the gift they needed to fix this mess. A gift that she only now recognized the value of.

JP stopped, then turned slowly. "If you wish to involve me in another illegal scheme—"

"No. I was wrong not to listen to you the first time." *That* got his attention. "You got me out of jail despite the fact that I actually committed the offense. Surely we can find an... *opportunity* to thwart an order based on a bunch of lies."

"The two situations are not identical," JP said.

"I know, but..." All they had to do was obtain a starship—how hard could that be? The IES had acquired a wide variety of vehicles throughout its four-year life, though most of those had been temporarily commandeered to respond to a crisis, and either the vehicles themselves—or, occasionally, compensation for them—had to be returned afterward.

But who was going to bother them to return one of the hundreds of inactive vessels Arriet claimed were in orbit?

"JP," Brook said. "The IES can legally commandeer ships, right?"

JP inclined his head. "In times of emergency, that is correct, yes."

Brook flicked a look back toward the detention center. On the roof was a police transport shuttle. "I'd say the dismantlement of the IES is a pretty serious emergency."

JP looked uncertain. Could he be warming up to the idea? "That is an... unusual, but plausible interpretation, Captain." His gaze

followed hers. “In any case, we would only be able to petition the Emergency Service to contest the order if we acquired a ship large enough to allow us to continue our interstellar operations.”

“Well,” Brook said, “I have it on good authority that there are ‘hundreds’ of those ships in orbit around Meltia. I could get there—if only I had someone to handle the paperwork.”

She spread her arms to indicate that she had nothing to hide. This plan was audacious—but ultimately completely legal. If JP was willing to rethink his departure.

“I believe,” JP said, “that such a task would fall under the purview of your political liaison officer.”

Brook grinned. “Then you’d better tell him that we don’t have all day.”

She dashed back to the glass doors of the detention center, throwing one open with her left hand while she grabbed her IES transceiver with her right.

“We’re with the IES,” she said to the nearest police officer as she sent a query to Arriet. “We’re going to need to borrow your ship.”

The officer gave her a confused look. “Didn’t you just—”

JP produced his IES identification. “Sir, under section one of the Emergency Services Act, personnel of the Meltian Republic Emergency Service, or any sub-organization thereof—”

“Okay, okay!” The officer raised his arms. “Follow me.”

The three of them stomped up a staircase to arrive on the roof of the detention center, where the officer unlocked the transit shuttle and beckoned them inside. He made a move to enter the cockpit of the vehicle, but Brook held up a hand. “We’ll take it from here.”

“Of course, Ma’am. Good luck.” The police officer departed.

At the same time, Arriet picked up Brook’s query, so she tossed the transceiver to JP as she strapped herself into the pilot’s seat. “Put it on the ship’s sound system.”

Brook was no pilot—her job was to give orders to the people who actually flew the *Kindred Spirit*—but the transport was designed for non-pilot police officers, with a standard throttle-and-stick setup, so she was quickly able to ease it off the ground.

“Captain?” Representative Arriet’s voice came out of the transport’s consoles.

“Representative.” Brook angled the transport’s nose upward and pushed the throttle forward. “About those ships you mentioned: where can we find them?”

“I was referring to the Boneyard,” Arriet said.

“Right.” The name conjured images of Interplanetary Network broadcasts from just after the Order War, showing thousands of no longer needed vessels being clustered into a massive orbital shipyard

over Meltia for storage. “JP can you get me coordinates on that?”

“Likely,” he said.

“Captain, I don’t know what you’re planning, but you’ll need to do it quickly. We drafted the order to dismantle the IES this morning and submitted it to our administrative staff for documentation and distribution. It could be delivered to the headquarters of the Emergency Service at any minute.”

“I know,” Brook said. “JP told me. Is there any way we could stop the order after it’s been delivered?”

“What do you mean, ‘stop’ it?” Arriet’s tone was suspicious, almost as if Brook had just been arrested for something similar.

Luckily, JP leaned into the cramped cockpit at that moment. “Representative, once we acquire a vessel from the Boneyard, we plan to petition the Emergency Service to contest the dismantlement order on the basis of its counterfactual statement that we have no ship. To the captain’s question, that option is removed as soon as the Emergency Service signs off on the order.” JP tapped one of the readouts that surrounded Brook, and a neon green waypoint appeared on the ship’s viewport. “Your coordinates, Captain.”

“Thanks, JP.” Brook adjusted the orientation of the shuttle. They quickly left behind Meltia’s atmosphere for the blackness of space. “Arriet, can you keep an eye on that order for us?”

“Certainly,” Arriet said.

Brook did not realize they were approaching the Boneyard until its darkened, inactive vessels began to blot out the stars. She switched the viewport to a sensor-augmented display, and almost jumped as hundreds upon hundreds of blue-wireframe starships popped out of the void. She did not have much time to admire the scale of the place, though, as a fully operational Meltian Guard command frigate cut between them and the ghostly armada.

“JP?” Brook asked.

“I have a communications channel open with them,” he said. “They want us to come aboard.”

“Did you tell them it’s an emergency?” Brook asked.

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s try to make this quick.”

The command frigate opened one of its hangar bay doors, and Brook maneuvered the police shuttle inside. Once it was landed, she unstrapped herself and joined JP in walking down the gangway. A female Rosarian in a Meltian Guard officer’s uniform met them at the bottom, carrying a clipboard-sized personal screen.

“Captain Brook.” The Rosarian saluted her.

Brook made a quick guess based on the Rosarian’s uniform as she returned the gesture. “Lieutenant Commander?”

If she was wrong, the Rosarian did not correct her. “I understand you have need of one of our ships, Captain?”

“Yes,” Brook said, “for the Interstellar Emergency Service. Preferably quickly.”

The Rosarian frowned, consulting her personal screen. “What does that entail?”

“Well, our old one had these big fins coming off the side.” Brook illustrated the shape with her hands. “And a pointy—”

“We need a large interior microgravity receiving bay and capacity for at least two hundred crew members,” JP said.

“That too,” Brook said.

The Rosarian entered a command into her personal screen and then turned it to face Brook and JP. “No fins, but it should work.” The screen displayed a ship with a long, boxy body that opened at the front—their microgravity receiving bay—and a skinny protrusion poking out from the bottom side like the grip of an ill-proportioned gun.

“Perfect,” Brook said.

JP produced a small cube from a pocket—Brook recognized it as a biological signature, or biosig cube. “For legal purposes, we will just need you to officially sign over the vessel to us.”

The lieutenant commander gave JP a skeptical look but accepted the biosig cube.

“Captain Brook!” Arriet’s voice emanated from the interior of the police shuttle. “The order has been dispatched.”

Brook smiled. “Don’t worry, I’m sure JP’s got us almost squared away.”

“Unfortunately, Captain,” JP said, “just as the dismantlement order must be delivered in person, so too must our petition to contest it.”

Brook blinked. “Meltia. What is it with Meltia and doing things in person?”

JP began, “Meltian political culture—”

“Never mind!” Brook held up a hand. “How are we going to get back to Meltia, fast?”

“My ship and my crew stand ready to assist you, Captain,” the Rosarian said. “Though I am still not sure what the nature of your emergency is.”

“Warm up your flip drive, then,” Brook said. “Take us as close as you can to Telahmir.”

The lieutenant commander departed quickly, but Brook knew it would not be enough. The frigate’s flip drive could only take them to the fringes of Meltia’s atmosphere. They would have to make the descent to the surface in the shuttle, which would still take a lot

longer than flying a hovercar from the Legislature to the Emergency Service.

If the courier was able to use a hovercar.

Brook sprinted back into the shuttle, leaving JP scribbling something on a personal screen. She quickly found her transceiver, linked to the ship's computer, and removed it.

"Later, Arriet." She closed that communications channel and opened another to the Telahmir Security Command Center. TeSeComm was responsible for a range of duties centered on keeping the capital of the Meltian Republic safe.

Including restricting air traffic.

"TeSeComm, this is Jareyn Brook, Captain of the Interstellar Emergency Service," she said as soon as they picked up her query. "We have an emergency situation, and I need to ground all non-military, non-Emergency-Service air traffic over Telahmir."

"Yes, Captain," came the reply. "Should we take additional precautionary measures?"

"Not at the moment." Brook cut the communications channel and returned to the hangar. In another city, this move might have halted the delivery of the order completely, but in Telahmir, with its famous pedestrian culture, the grounding would just slow the courier down.

When she stepped out of the shuttle, Brook saw through the Airshell field that protected the hangar that Meltia had grown a thousand times closer, its red-brown surface now taking up her entire field of view. The lieutenant commander must have activated the ship's flip drive while Brook was inside, shifting the vessel superluminally across space.

JP thrust his personal screen into her hands, and Brook looked down to find their fully filled out contest petition. "Good wo..."

"Captain?" JP asked.

Brook's eyes had wandered to a Meltian Guard interceptor that was sitting next to their police shuttle. "We *do* still need to get down to Telahmir quickly, right?"

"Likely." JP turned, following her line of sight. "Captain, with all due respect, you can't fly an interceptor."

"That was a *Foonyan* interceptor," Brook said, "and the weather was atrocious. This one's Meltian, so it's got a standard throttle-and-stick setup—it's basically just a really fast hovercar. Hey! You!"

The pilot Brook yelled at turned around.

"Can we borrow this?"

"Under standard operating procedure, absolutely not," the pilot said, "but this *is* an emergency, and the CO *did* say we should help you..."

Brook shot a sideways glance at JP. "Is that a *plausible*

interpretation of his commanding officer's words?"

"I'd say so," JP said.

"Great." Brook clambered into the interceptor.

"All you have to do is bring that petition to the front desk," JP said. "Or anyone in the organization. So long as you beat the Legislature's courier there, you'll be fine."

"Thanks." Brook wedged the personal screen between her legs as she warmed up the interceptor. Realizing that if this stunt went wrong, these words might be her last to JP, she added, "For everything."

Brook sealed the interceptor's cockpit. The control scheme was indeed centered on the universal throttle-and-stick system, albeit surrounded by a plethora of controls she did not recognize, so she was able to gingerly lift the craft off the hangar floor and out of the command frigate.

Nose pointed down at Telahmir, Brook shoved the throttle forward. The surface of the planet leaped up toward her. Judging by the rate at which isolated clouds were blurring past her, Brook knew that without the normalizing force of the interceptor's artificial gravity, she would be unconscious if not dead. Still, she kept the throttle at the interceptor's maximum velocity until the spires of Telahmir spread out below her. She then pulled it all the way back, firing full retrograde.

Her descent slowed noticeably—but not as much as she had hoped. The spires continued to rise up, like spikes coming to impale her tiny ship. Brook was confident that no civilian craft would be allowed to go this fast this low over Telahmir, but she was in a Meltian Guard interceptor, so ostensibly she knew what she was doing. Brook spotted the Emergency Service's headquarters—three boxy buildings in a U-shape around a marble-rimmed pond—and adjusted her course to come down in the middle of it. Not that doing so helped her with her velocity problem.

Brook knew real interceptor pilots executed insanely-high-acceleration turns routinely during combat, but she was not getting anywhere near that kind of thrust—because she was using her retrograde thrusters.

Brook flipped the interceptor around, pointing its nose and tiny retrograde thrusters toward the sky while firing her powerful main thruster to push her away from the ground.

Her descent slowed considerably. She was falling past the Emergency Service's building—there were meters left until the ground. Then a white gas flowed up and over her interceptor.

Thud.

Brook shut off the interceptor's thrusters as the ship settled, butt-

first, against the ground. She unsealed the cockpit and swung herself out of the interceptor as the white gas dissipated.

Not white gas—*steam*. Brook had landed in the center of the Emergency Service's pond, vaporizing it with her thrusters in the process.

A Meltian man in a suit—the courier from the Legislature—was gawking at her from behind the low stone wall that had been the rim of the water feature a few seconds ago. The decorative barrier must have protected him from the worst of the steam.

"Good morning, sir." Brook retrieved JP's personal screen from the interceptor and clambered out of the former pond, heading for the front door to the central Emergency Service building.

As if suddenly remembering his job, the courier stumbled after her. Inside, the Emergency Service receptionist—a male Archavian like JP—was just as speechless as the Legislature man.

"Good morning to you, too," Brook said.

The courier produced a small personal screen from his pocket. "I have an order from the Meltian Republic Legislature Subcommittee on —"

"And I have a petition to contest that order." Brook set JP's screen on the receptionist's desk.

The receptionist looked from one screen to the other. "Uh—"

"Is everything in order?" Brook asked. If this document went through, she could fly back up to the Boneyard, start up their new ship, and flip over to the Erian solar system to pick up the rest of her crew—she trusted JP to clean up any legal aftermath. Unless Griffin was willing to physically come after them—which Brook highly doubted—they would be free of his influence.

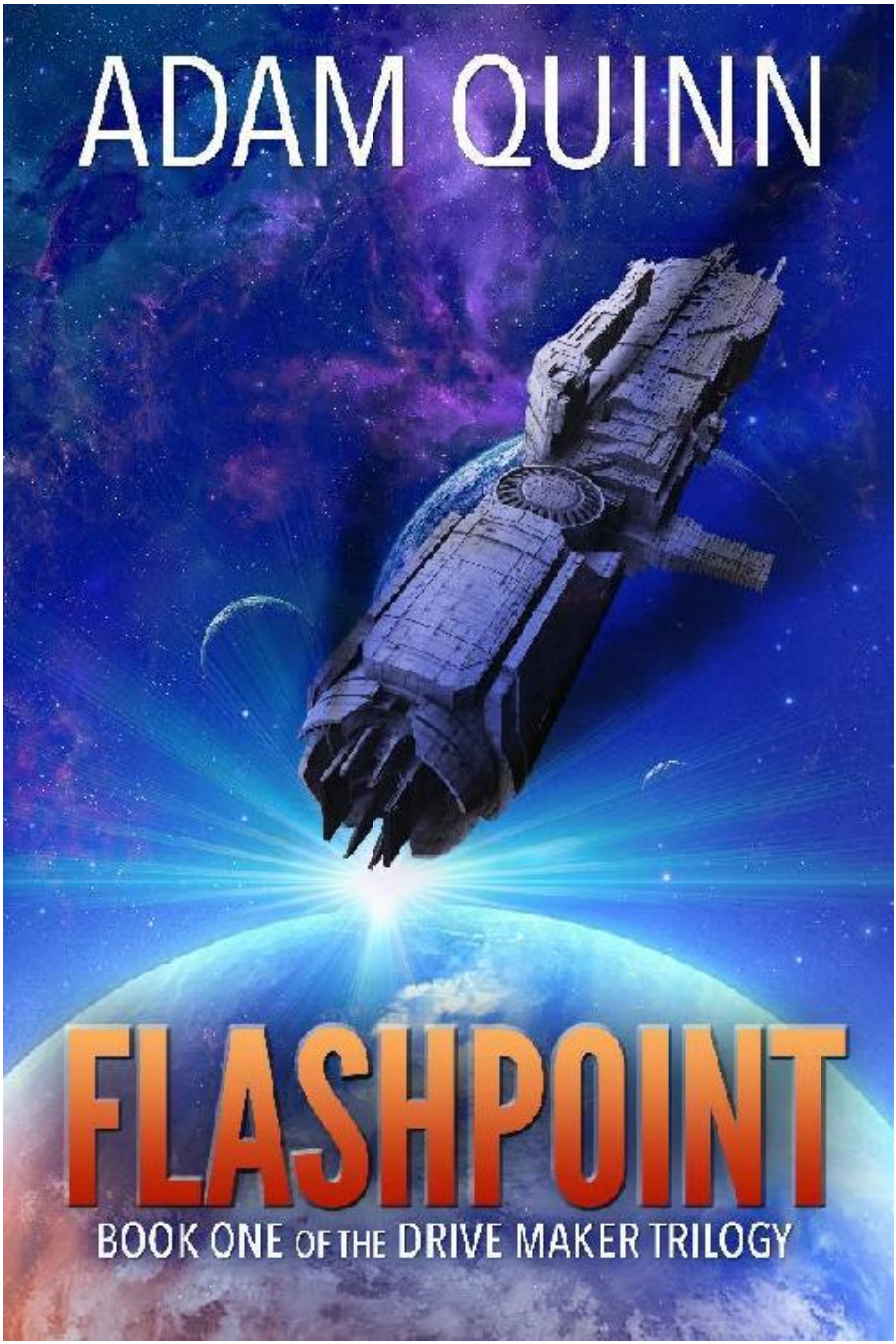
The receptionist took JP's screen gingerly and scrolled through the document it presented. After a minute, he said, "Everything... except on this document, where you receive ownership of the vessel from the Boneyard, you, ah, you need to give it a name."

"Oh," Brook said.

"Of course," the receptionist said, "if your chosen name differs from the name of your previous vessel, you'll need to apply for a new registration."

Even if there was not the danger of giving Griffin another chance to thwart them, Brook had dealt with enough Meltian red tape for a lifetime. "Just go ahead and put it down as the 'MRS *Kindred Spirit*.'"

Q&A with Adam Quinn



How similar is this story to the rest of your work?

Very! In fact, “Procurement” is in the same universe as my main series, the Drive Maker Trilogy. *Flashpoint*, the first book in that trilogy, takes place about six years after the events of “Procurement,” and features Brook, JP, Arriet, and Charles Griffin, as well as the new *Kindred Spirit*.

So that means that Brook goes six full years without needing a new ship?

A fact for which I am sure Brook and JP are both grateful.

What about Roth the elevator guard? He was my favorite character! Does he—

He dies.

What?!

Hit by a hovercar. Very sad. Just two days away from retirement.

Are you serious?

No.

Oh. I guess I should read those other Drive Maker Trilogy books, then—how can I get them?

Glad you asked; *Flashpoint* is available right now on Amazon. For information on my existing titles, you can visit my website at adamquinnauthor.com. To make sure you’re the first to know when new titles come out, you can sign up for my newsletter at smarturl.it/AQNewsletter.

Only one title?

Don’t worry—*Pressure Point*, the sequel to *Flashpoint*, is scheduled to come out later this Fall, followed by a novella in the same universe in Spring 2017.

But seriously, about Roth—

I’m sure he goes on to live a happy and fulfilling life.

One More Star, Shining
by *Anthea Sharp*

LIZA ROTH TOOK a swallow of her green jimjack beer and, for the hundredth time, tried to ignore the old-Earth piano keyboard stuck in the corner of the miners' cantina. Even if the instrument worked, which she doubted, she probably couldn't remember how to play any of her pieces.

And supposing she did, it was so crowded and noisy in the cantina the music would just be buried under the babble of voices, the clank of gear, the clatter of dishes.

That would be fine, actually. She didn't want anyone to hear her, to notice and start asking questions about how an asteroid miner on the far edge of the galaxy knew how to play an antiquated hunk of machinery, let alone perform the classic works of the old masters.

So she turned her back on the keyboard and its protective bubble, and looked instead at her girlfriend, Selina Perez, who sat beside her at the bar.

"Can't fool me," Selina said. The warm light from the vidscreen illuminated her face, glossing her curly dark hair and showing the playful dimple at the corner of her mouth. "I can see you thinking about that dusty old thing."

Liza shook her head, denying the truth. *You loved to play,* her memories whispered. *Music was the one thing keeping you sane back then.*

She never should have admitted her interest in the keyboard to Selina. Her girlfriend was tenacious, and in their six months together had pried more out of Liza than she'd ever wanted to give.

A knot deep in her belly reminded her it was dangerous to get close. To share information that might give away all her secrets. But it was too late. She'd already lost her heart to Selina.

Eventually, she'd tell her girlfriend about her past.

Just... not yet.

"Look." Selina blew a stream of clove-scented vapor past Liza's cheek. "If you can play, you owe it to everyone in this granky place to share that gift. Life is hard enough as is. We need a bit of sweetness to keep us going—you know that. Music. Beer. Kisses."

She bent close to Liza, pressing their lips together to illustrate her argument.

Liza let herself get lost in that softness. After she'd fled Earth, she didn't know if she'd ever be happy again. Selina had showed her that she could start over—that a broken heart didn't last forever.

As their kiss deepened, a few people let out catcalls, and further down the bar someone started belting out a raunchy song. Reluctantly, Liza broke the kiss.

Selina winked at her. “Really, though. You should play that piano.”

“The bartender said the parts for the jukie system will arrive soon,” Liza said. “Then they can fix the music and we won’t have to listen to drunken bar songs anymore.”

“Soon can mean months,” Selina said. “You’ve got light inside you, novia. Let some of it out.”

“We’ll be down planet soon enough.” Liza changed the subject. “On vacation there’ll be plenty of music to listen to.”

“And dance to.” Selina slipped off her bar stool and did a little shimmy. “I wish you could come down with me tomorrow. Stupid schedule rotations.”

“Just two days, and then we get most of the break together. You can scout out the place and show me all the good stuff when I get there.”

“There’s way more than ten days’ worth of fun on the pleasure isle of Raldoon, so they say.” Selina grinned. “It’s only the top vacation spot in the whole sector. I’ve been saving up for this trip for ages.”

“We both have.”

It was expensive to shuttle down to the nearby planet of Doralfi, let alone take a jaunt to the pleasure isle. But Selina made everything worthwhile.

“Gonna stay up here and turn into a dried-out stick?” her girlfriend had said when Liza had expressed her doubts. “We only get one life, darling. Let it shine.”

Selina was right. After almost a year working the asteroid mines, Liza needed a break.

Sometimes, late in the dark when she was alone, she’d curl into a tight ball and allow a few tears to seep out the corners of her eyes, remembering everything she’d left. Was this life she’d made for herself any better? Had she made the wrong choice?

In the morning, though, all her reasons would come flooding back. It wasn’t much of an existence, true, but it was hers. Her choice. And she’d found some happiness in it.

Selina hopped back onto her stool and took another suck of clove-steam. “I want to buy a nice dress down there. And shoes, if I can afford them. Something with sparkles.”

She stuck out her foot, studying her scuffed boot.

“You’d look good in dimsilk,” Liza said, then bit her tongue. “I mean, there are some decent imitations.”

“It’s pretty stuff, from what I can tell on the vids.” Selina winked at her. “Think of the highbrows we’ll be rubbing elbows with—and us a pair of granky miners. Play our cards right, and they’ll never know.”

“Right.” Liza took another swallow of her beer, letting the tangy flavor fill her mouth.

She’d have to be careful in Raldoon not to let herself slip. It would be easy to revert back to the ‘highbrow’ ways she’d been born to. One year as an asteroid miner couldn’t erase the nobility she carried, all unwilling, in her blood.

“Dance with me,” Selina said, lacing her fingers through Liza’s.

“There’s no music.”

“We’ll make our own. On the floor, and off.” Selina’s eyes were bright with promises.

Liza finished off her beer, then let her girlfriend pull her off the barstool and into the rest of the night.

* * *

“Figure they’ve landed by now?” Trudi Miller asked, leaning on her diggerbot, her helmet’s face mask covered with fine dust.

“Probably.” Liza slid a load of rock into the cart. More dust rose, glittering in the harsh artificial lights. “It’s only four hours down to the surface.”

Before she’d run away, she had never thought about the kind of menial work people all over the Empire performed—or if she had, she’d assumed that mechanicals did most of it.

But mechanicals were expensive, and the mining dust damaged their circuitry. Human labor was cheaper, and easier to replace.

“Hope we can ping chat down to Doralfi after shift,” Trudi said. “I miss my boy already.”

Trudi and her son had been working the asteroid mines for four years, and Rand looked forward to his yearly vacations on Raldoon. He and Selina had been on the same shuttle down, leaving Trudi and Liza to wave them off from the docking bay.

Trudi preferred to spend her vacation time relaxing in her room, devouring vids and screenbooks.

“I’m too old for that kind of fun,” she’d said when Liza asked. “And I always have been, even when I was young. Dancing and carousing and holo-games—the thought wearies me to the bone. I like my pleasures on the quieter side. Though I do enjoy the tales Rand brings back.”

Liza spent the rest of her shift wondering what Selina was doing. She could hardly wait for the moment she was planetside, holding her

girlfriend in her arms. With the added bonus of being able to wash the miner's dust off her skin without it settling right back on again.

Before dinner, she got a quick chat in with Selina, whose smile was brighter than ever.

"I wish you were here, love—there's a sunset dinner and, oh, the water is so warm. I'm going dancing later, in my new dress." She twirled, the pale fabric swirling about her, contrasting with her dark skin. "Like it?"

"You look beautiful," Liza swallowed the lump in her throat. "When I get down there, I'll buy you a necklace to match. Something shiny."

"I'd love that. But I love you more." Selina blew her a kiss. "This cheapass handheld is almost out of credits. Talk to you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, love."

Selina smiled, her image dissolving into the blank screen of Liza's handheld. Communications planetside were horribly expensive, for both the sender and receiver, but the minute of conversation and the sight of her girlfriend's smile had been worth it.

* * *

A grief-stricken cry woke Liza. She sat up, blinking, then fumbled for her handheld. It was almost three in the morning. Was someone having night terrors?

The cry came again, floating down the corridor, and Liza heard someone yell to shut up.

She pulled on her thin robe and went to the door, sliding it open to reveal the gray walls of the sleeping area hallway. Someone was sobbing—Liza could hear it through the closed plasmetal doors, and it didn't sound like the aftermath of a nightmare.

Bare feet cold over the floor, she went down the hall, counting doors. The crying was coming from the fourth one on the left. Trudi's room.

Heart squeezing with sudden apprehension, Liza tapped on the door.

"Trudi? What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Nooo," it was a moan of pain.

"I'll call emergency," Liza said, whirling.

Trudi's door whooshed open to reveal the older woman, the screen of her handheld illuminating the tears flowing down her lined cheeks.

"It's Rand," she whispered. "My baby." She stood there, rocking back and forth.

Liza stepped inside, closed the door, and led Trudi to the disheveled bed.

"Sit down, and tell me."

Trudi sank down on the bed, then held out her device. As Liza read the scrolling communications, her blood went cold.

Rand: Mami I love you.

Rand: Someone here with D-ray. Shooting.

Trudi: Are you ok?

Rand: Trapped.

Gods, no. Liza sucked in her breath. D-rays were banned on all the civilized words. They could kill dozens of people with one sweep. And Rand was down there in Raldoon, trapped by some madman with a death machine. Her legs suddenly weak, she sat heavily on the bed beside Trudi.

Her blood went to ice. What if Selina was there, too?

"Where is he? What's happening?"

Trudi drew in a gasping breath. "A dance club."

Selina had planned to go dancing. A wave of nausea swept over Liza as she glanced back at the conversation preserved on the screen.

Rand: Call for help.

Rand: I'm going to die.

Trudi: I called. Help coming. Is anyone hurt?

Rand: Yes. Lots.

Trudi: Stay safe. Please.

"Has security come?" Liza asked. The handheld trembled in her grip. This could not be happening. Not to Rand.

Trudi nodded. "Been almost an hour. Some vid coverage. Shooter is barricaded in the building. With my boy. I haven't heard from him in over twenty minutes."

She covered her face with her hands, shoulders shaking with desperation. Tears blurring her vision, Liza kept reading.

Rand: Still in building. He has us. Need help. Call them, Mami.

Trudi: Guards are there. Tell me you see them.

Rand: Hurry.

Rand: He's here.

Trudi: Stay down.

Trudi: Are you hurt?

Trudi: Rand! Baby, are you ok?

Trudi: I love you.

Trudi: Talk to me.

Trudi: Baby?

Trudi: Rand?

Trudi: I love you.

It was the last thing on the screen. Liza checked the time of the

last communication, and felt like a black hole opened in her chest.

Over half an hour since Rand had responded.

She set the unanswered handheld down and put her arms around Trudi. She had the terrible conviction that Rand was dead. Help hadn't come in time. It was hard to breathe past the vacuum surrounding her heart, dragging all the light from her body.

What about Selina?

"I have to get down there," Trudi said. "My boy."

"The shuttle won't leave before eight," Liza said, cursing the fact they were stuck up in the belt. It was impossible to get to their loved ones.

"I don't have enough credits." Trudi's voice broke, and she bent over, her chest pressed to her knees.

For a moment, Liza almost offered Trudi her ticket down—but no. She had to get down there, too. Had to make sure Selina was safe.

"Ask the company to send you," Liza said.

If they wouldn't, she'd help take up a collection.

Trudi sat up, and gave a single nod. "They should. They should help."

"Let me get my handheld," Liza said. "Then I'll come stay with you until it's time."

She ran back to her room, heart pounding. Please, let there be a message from Selina that she was safe. That she'd gone to bed early. That she could hardly wait for Liza to arrive.

The screen was blank. No messages.

Liza flipped to the news, then stumbled to her chair as she read the headlines streaming past.

"Devastation at Raldoon Dance Club."

"Dozens Dead in Wake of D-beam Madman."

"Security Finally Takes Down Shooter in Club Massacre."

Why? She knotted her robe in her fingers. How could such a thing happen? And where was Selina?

She stabbed at the device, trying again and again to reach Selina, each time hearing her girlfriend's laughing, recorded voice telling her to try again later.

Grief knifed through Liza. Would there be a later, or had the bright spark of Selina's life been erased from the galaxy?

Numbly, Liza pulled on her clothing, then grabbed her handheld and went to sit with Trudi through the long, excruciating hours until morning.

* * *

The next morning, the miners were given the first three shifts off, and it was announced that all traffic to Raldoon was being restricted. Only relatives of those affected were allowed to travel to the surface. The eight am shuttle left, taking Trudi.

As the silvery craft receded, Liza hammered her fist against the thick plasglass viewport, then went to pace in her room. Rage and hope and fear fired her footsteps, churned in her belly until she couldn't bear it any longer.

The cantina was packed and smelly, but full of life. She needed life, in the face of so much death. They all did.

It seemed as though everyone in the belt was crammed onto barstools and around tables, talking, drinking, and staring at the screen over the bar as it updated with the names of the confirmed dead.

Every few minutes, a new name would appear, and the cantina would fall silent in a moment of respect. Two of the already-posted names were known to Liza—other miners who'd been vacationing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

She hated the stab of relief she felt with each unfamiliar name. That was someone's son, someone's lover, someone's wife.

Dead.

"Why'd he do it?" one of the miners at the bar next to her asked. "A D-ray, that's insane."

"Smuggled it on-planet," somebody replied. "One of those crazy Ascetics saw people dancing on the vids and decided it was his job to cleanse the place."

Another name posted, another breath of silence.

"Aw, damn," a woman said.

Rand Miller. The letters were stark against the screen.

"Trudi," Liza said, then realized she'd spoken aloud.

Tears slipped down her face, hot and messy. She couldn't imagine anything more terrible than what Trudi had gone through—seeing her son's last words, his pleas for help, and not being able to do a single thing.

Unless it was the horrible ache inside of not knowing.

Selina. Please.

More names, until the count reached fifty. Sixty. Seventy.

"How many?" Liza said, drinking another beer somebody had set in front of her.

Drinks were on the house, not that there was anything more exciting than jimjack to drink. Still, it helped blunt the razor-edges of grief.

"Near eighty, they think," the miner on her right said.

Liza pulled her handheld out of her pocket, trying not to hope.

The screen was dark.

Surely Selina would have told her she was safe, by now.

Two more unfamiliar names.

And then the one Liza had been dreading.

Selina Perez.

"No," she whispered.

The letters muddled and blurred, but the name was printed with stark clarity in her mind. Selina was one of the dead—her beautiful smile and teasing laughter, her warmth and light gone forever.

The universe held nothing but darkness.

* * *

The hours scraped past, turned into days, then weeks. Liza moved numbly through the mines. She felt as though the dust had permanently coated her soul. At night, memories of Selina knifed through her.

They'd talked about leaving the belt, going somewhere better and making a new life for themselves. Liza didn't know how, but Selina had always kissed away her worries.

"We'll figure out a way," she'd say. "Together, we can do anything. Look at these places!"

Then she'd pull up vids of Holst and X'inlii and for a while they'd dream.

There was no point now, but as the third month turned to the fourth, Liza found herself re-playing those vids. The lush forests of Holst seemed to whisper that things could be better, away from the mines. The tropical waters of X'inlii promised more peace than the edge of the galaxy could hold.

Maybe.

She still had the credits from her unused ticket to Raldoon, the vacation she and Selina never got to take together. But every time Liza thought about going, a part of her shied away.

In a new place, she wouldn't have any memories of Selina walking down the hallway, just so, or dancing to no music over the sticky floor of the cantina.

"It's been six months," Trudi said one night, as they shared a table. "You going to waste the rest of your life here, drinking jimjack and mourning? I don't think Selina would have wanted that."

Liza shrugged, and took another sip of the tangy beer.

"I'm leaving next week," Trudi said.

"What?" Liza set her beer on the dinged-up metal table. "You're leaving the mines?"

The older woman nodded. The lines on her face were carved deep, but her eyes were serene.

"With the settlement, and what I have saved up, I got a place out on Chugo. Small, but I don't need much room. Miner's pension will keep me in tea and crackers. I'm going to write those stories like Rand always told me to, instead of just dreaming about them. His memory deserves better than this."

She waved her hand at the cantina, but Liza knew she meant all of it—the dusty mining complex, the thankless work, the hard edges everywhere a person turned.

"Good for you." Liza meant it, and something kindled deep inside her. She wouldn't call it hope.

What does Selina's memory deserve?

The keyboard in the corner waited. It was too late for Selina to hear her play, but Liza still heard her words. Would always hear them.

"You've got light inside you, novia. Let it shine."

What better tribute could Liza give, than to play? To let the emotions bottled up inside her fingertips, inside her heart, rush free.

Before she could change her mind, she rose and went to the instrument. The protective bubble was gritty with dust. She folded it back, then wiped her fingers on her coveralls, trying to get some of the grime off.

The bartender came up beside her, towel tucked through his belt.

"You know how to use that thing?" he asked, squinting at her.

"I used to play. You mind?"

"Go ahead." He glanced at the half-empty cantina, the shadows and weary faces. "Might be all to the good."

Liza nodded. It might.

She sat on the small, padded bench in front of the keys. They marched off to either side, traditional black and white, orderly and serene. Above them was a row of colorful buttons and a screen display. She could create any sound she wanted, but tonight, just the piano.

Holding her breath, she flicked on the power switch.

A comforting hum came from the speakers mounted on either side of the keys, and the screen and buttons glowed with light.

Liza wasn't familiar with this model, but it was made by Yamaha, similar to the keyboard she'd learned on. It had taken two years before her strict tutor had allowed her to play the behemoth grand piano kept in the climate-controlled music room of the palace she'd grown up in, and she doubted many of those vintage instruments had been exported off Earth.

The keyboard, though, there were plenty of those scattered across the galaxy. Even out here, on the edge.

Selina.

The name flared across her thoughts, and she realized that along with the pain, there was an echo of joy. Then sorrow blossomed up inside again, a dark, shining flower of loss. Liza caught her breath and set her hands on the keyboard.

It took a moment to adjust to the action of the keys, to press with just enough force. She stopped and tweaked the volume, then adjusted the foot pedal that was still, miraculously, attached.

Then she played, letting the tears fall down her cheeks, letting the grief pour from her body. *Moonlight Sonata*, then Barber's *Adagio*. *River Flows in You* and *The Rose*.

Her fingers, stiff from her long shifts in the mines, slowly loosened. Her shoulders ached, but she ignored them. Her heart ached more.

The feel of the cantina changed—softened, warmed.

Liza didn't know how long she played. As long as she needed to. But when she turned, stretching her sore arms, she found that the room was full again. The quiet light shone on faces that had, for a few moments at least, found some peace.

Selina. The memory was a punch to her gut.

Liza would never forget.

But she couldn't live with that raw ache right up next to her heart, day after day. And she couldn't stay there in the belt any longer. There were new planets to explore, even if she didn't have Selina to explore them with.

She thought of the dark universe stretching out around them, seeded with tiny specks of stars. Each one just a pinprick of light, yet together they held the blackness at bay. She owed it to Selina's memory to shine, however dimly.

To be one more star against the night.

"Will you play again, tomorrow?" Trudi asked, smiling. A tear track etched through the dust on her cheek.

"Yes," Liza said. "I will."

Q&A with Anthea Sharp

What was your inspiration for this story?

After the terrible events of the summer of 2016, and particularly the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, I was constantly on the edge of grief. Reading the texts sent from Eddie Justice, trapped in the club, to his mother completely shattered me, and I found myself wondering daily; *How can a person keep going after such tragedy? How*

can we possibly pick up the pieces and move forward when the universe is so full of terrible things?

I wrote, a lot, and finally found my answer in this story. It might not be your answer, but I have to believe that every piece of light, every kind and good thing we can do in our lives, must surely push back the darkness.

(Proceeds from the sale of this story have been donated to help victims of the shooting in Orlando, and especially the Justice family, at https://www.gofundme.com/2929hs6c/donate)

Do you write happier tales?

Yes! Most of my work is much lighter than the story in this anthology. My bestselling Feyland series is a blend of high-tech gaming and ancient faerie lore (it's been described as "*Ready Player One* with faeries"), and is more on the YA side, with a touch of romance. The first book in the series, *Feyland: The Dark Realm*, is free at all ebook retailers.

Tell us more about the setting of *One More Star, Shining*.

This story is one of several shorter pieces I've written to explore the edges of a Victorian Spacepunk universe—one where Queen Victoria was replicated by aliens in 1850 and reigns, basically, forever. You can find more Victoria Eternal stories in my *Stars & Steam* collection, and I'm currently working on a brand-new novel set in this Galactic British Empire.

Where can we find out more about you and your writing?

Head on over to https://antheasharp.com/ where you can join my mailing list (and get a free story!) and learn more about the Feyland series, plus take a peek at all the various shenanigans I'm up to in the writing world.

Tabitha's Vacation
by *Michael Anderle*

What you thought you knew about vampires is wrong... so very, very wrong.

Over a thousand years ago, the first human stumbled across a crashed Kurtherian alien ship, and was enhanced to help the alien race fight a war. Unfortunately, he left the ship confused, in pain and incompletely modified. His next twelve centuries and beyond created additional changed humans... what folklore called Vampires.

Bethany Anne, chosen as the final Matriarch to be charged with the responsibility for all Vampires, helped clean up issues between Vampires and Werewolves and prepared for the defense of Earth. Now, she has taken the fight out among the stars. She created a group to enforce the law—enhanced humans to track down and exact justice in her name. And one time, Ranger Tabitha was told to go on a non-vacation, vacation.

Because sometimes the only way to rest is to get rid of restless energy.

CHAPTER ONE

One Problem, One Ranger.

I WALKED INTO Rossini's Bar on Planet Bectal with what my boss calls a physical ailment—a short temper and a bad case of I-don't-give-a-shit. I was grumping to him for the third monthly meeting in a row about nothing to do when he came to check on me in my area of the sector. As my doctor, he prescribed a two-month vacation.

My boss knows me too damned well.

He isn't going to lose my services for the three months. It's three because I need two weeks travel both ways, and he knows I know he's still getting work out of me. So, he can kiss my ass on the actual travel time. I booked that on the nicest, most expensive luxury liner on this side of the Galaxy for my vacation, everything else was going to be work. Perhaps fun work, but work nonetheless.

Here on Bectal's world, I would just be doing my job. Some vacation. Poking the alien equivalent of anthills, looking under disgusting rocks and kicking over dilapidated buildings to see what maggots from the local equivalent of the criminal world squirmed away. Hoping to be faster than I could figure out what the hell they've done wrong and if necessary, shoot them.

My usual area of responsibility was two solar systems back and one up and damned if it wasn't getting too boring. It had taken me thirty years, but I'd finally gotten most organizations to understand The Queen Bitch's Rule for her Rangers which is 'One Problem-One Ranger.' The corollary to it, from my boss, is Rangers have no limits for our backup, it just can't be another Ranger.

One time, on the Sver'an planet, I got into a shouting match with the equivalent of the local Warlord. I hadn't wanted to lay waste to half a city just to pull out his good-for-absolutely-nothing second cousin from his whatever-the-hell the third parent was called in their family group.

So, in front of him and his men, I told him I would call for a battalion of the Queen Bitch's Guardians if he didn't produce the miscreant.

That rat-faced POS just stared at me and called my bluff. He didn't know us Rangers very well. So I did.

Call, that is.

Because as a Ranger, we have a direct link to the Queen Bitch herself, Bethany Anne. The conversation back then went something like this:

"Tet'gurky, you will produce your psychotic murdering little prick from god-knows-what-you-call-the-baby-momma or I'll call in a

battalion of the Queen's Guardians to pull his useless ass out of this city."

I was rather angry at the time. It was my third time to this hellhole of a planet, and those living here were having problems with the Queen's version of justice. Which is to say, 'be nice to each other, or else.' Some alien species had a real problem with the nice part. Oh, it isn't that they don't understand the concept, it *is* pretty universal, it's that they have lived so long on the, 'those who have strength rule,' corollary that when someone comes along with more strength, they have to test it.

A lot.

All the damn time—it was starting to piss me off. Sure, the first time a people test Bethany Anne's rules I get it. By the second time, I'm wondering if this area just didn't get the memo (and I call to make sure the PR department sent the damn memo.) By the third time, it's just a case of who is backing down first, them, or me.

It sure the hell isn't going to be me.

So, it was my third time speaking to Tet'gurky so I figured he had to have read the memo, and they had done the research, and the rumors about Bethany Anne's Guardians had to have made their way around the planet from the fighting two solar years back.

But the little prick answered me, "Do it, Ranger Tabitha." He waved his furry little arms around his Warren with the other fifteen leaders of his clan, "I don't think we are so significant to the Queen Bitch that she would waste such valuable resources as a battalion of her finest soldiers to locate one little problem child."

"He's not a child, Tet'gurky, he's created his own little psychopaths with baby mommas," I answered.

"You say psychopath, we say the strongest is always right. He was the strongest." Tet'gurky's sibilant laughter spread to the fifteen little rat-faced throats around him, and it pissed me off.

It wasn't my job to kill them all, no matter how upset I was at being laughed at. My job was bringing the little bastard to justice for killing someone on the world under my jurisdiction. So, fuck'em.

Bethany Anne?

Hello, Tabitha!

Do you have a second to chat? I asked. While she is a friend, she's still the Queen and even after a hundred and fifty years, I treat her as my liege first, my friend second.

Yes, I'm en route to check on a diplomatic impasse. We're in the middle of a transition, recalculating the heading. I fucking hate this shit. Some of the ships with us are so damned slow.

Well, if you didn't ride in the fastest chariot, perhaps you wouldn't be so impatient.

Yeah, well, some things don't change with age. But, enough about me, what's up with you? You rarely call just to say 'hi.'

Sorry about that. Bethany Anne was right. I did rarely call just to chat. *I've got a problem here on Sver'an where I'm trying to pull out a POS. I either need to get help from the local Warlord, who is related to the little creep, or drop a lot of shock and awe to make them produce the freak. Or actually tear apart this city to get to him. So, I told him to produce, or I'd request help.*

He called your bluff, did he? Bethany Anne laughed.

Yes! Little turd-magnet says he doesn't think his little cousin-or-other is important enough for you to support me.

Tabitha, have you changed your body recently to grow red hair? she asked me.

No, why? I responded, confused.

Because your language when you change your body to grow red hair reverts back to when we first met.

Oh, hadn't noticed.

Either way, tell him that I will speak to him within two galactic-standard hours, and he will produce his cousin. If I'm waiting more than five minutes, I'll find his cousin, and he and his men are forfeit. Please keep the area calm until then.

Wait, what? I just need a battalion. I'm not asking you to show up.

I understand, but think about your reputation. When you threaten a Queen's Battalion on this nowhere little planet, and the Queen Bitch shows up?

Yeah, but which rep? The one with the criminals, or the one in the Rangers? I complained. *My group is going to laugh their asses off.*

Well, the rep with the Rangers is your own to deal with. Besides, Barnabas is going to think this is funny as hell.

Yeah, well he would. I grumped.

All right, Pilot says the new course is locked in and I've told the group I'll catch back up to them on the third jump. Besides, you can tell the other Rangers I was bored.

You are *bored*, I told her.

See! When you tell the truth, the truth will set you free.

With that, she closed off our connection.

I looked back over at Tet'gurky, a clearly noticeable annoyance showing on my face.

"What?" he asked, an expression I'd learned was glee for his kind, "Did she tell you to figure it out on your own?" He gave that shitty laugh again, and his group took it up. Sixteen annoying hissing laughs.

"No," I told him, "She said to tell you she would be here within two galactic-standard hours, and you would either produce him within

five minutes, or every one of your lives here are forfeit," I smiled sardonically back at him.

Tet'gurky's laughing stopped abruptly and his face turned angry, "She didn't! You lie to continue this negotiation." He was leaning towards me. I wanted to punch his nose out the other side of his skull.

"No, you ass," I reached into my duster and pulled out a clock timer. It's a rolled up little piece of plastic maybe ten inches long and four tall. I had my cyber-core program it to two galactic standard hours. That was about three and a half hours on this world. I walked over to the wall to the left of his desk. We had been bitching at each other in the back room of a bar. It had seven round tables in it and five of them were filled. I took a knife from under my coat and pinned the clock to the wall, stabbing it hard to hold it in place, turned to the table next to me, grabbed a chair and sat down. "When that reaches zero, if the Queen hasn't shown up, I'll leave."

The men all looked back to Tet'gurky, for guidance, I guessed. "So, that is a Ranger's promise?" he asked. Apparently, rat-face had been studying.

I nodded, "Yes, it is. More, it's a promise from Ranger Tabitha specifically." I had cultivated the hell out of never personally swearing on my name unless I knew something would happen. "If she isn't here within two hours, I walk without your cousin. However, if she is here within two hours, she expects your cousin to be here as well. I'm sure you know the 'or else' if that doesn't happen," I smiled at him. To a lot of aliens, a human smiling is a scary sight. Sver'an smile showing their teeth during negotiations as well, so no psychological benefit to me.

"What if I have him brought nearby, are you going to grab him and leave?" Tet'gurky asked, "Is this another Ranger trick?" he hissed, a little worry cracking through his mask of boldness.

Well, shit. He had been researching the Rangers, and specifically me. I enjoyed tricking the hell out of my foes. It kept the many years of my life interesting.

"Nope, no trick. I've talked with the Queen, and she should be here soon. I guess she was in the neighborhood... and bored." I faked a yawn and looked back up at the clock. Three minutes had elapsed. Shit, this was going to be one long ass boring two hours.

Then again, I started to see Tet'gurky sweat, so maybe it wasn't.

I reached under my duster for another knife and began to clean my fingernails with it. It was all show. This knife was dull. The knives I actually use would slice my fool fingers off at the tip, and I'd have to grow them back. Which, frankly, for fingers is an annoying pain in the ass as it makes it difficult to grab shit. The other Rangers think it's funny as hell to give you a sphere large enough you need the non-existent tips of your fingers to grab.

Last time it happened to me, I used a type of glue to grab it with my palm and gave them the smallest-fingered rude gesture ever.

Just after I got inducted into the Rangers, back on Earth before we closed the door on that rat-infested place... Huh, rats, I guess everything's coming up rats for me right now. Anyway, I digress. Back when I was on Earth and had just been inducted into the Rangers, I did all I could to study the original Texas Rangers.

Then the stories about the Lone Ranger and finally American westerns in general as I'm originally from South America on that world. I never wore a cowboy duster until we left Earth and I started doing this job on other planets.

First, because they weren't fashionable on Earth. I mean, how the hell do you get respect for being a Ranger when everyone looks at you and asks if you're trying to copy the movie The Matrix? Out here, no one knows about the Matrix, and considering the second and third films from that series, that's a blessing.

Second, because I didn't need to keep so much shit on me back then, including special vials of blood in case I became someone's bitch in a fight. It doesn't happen often, but every now and then someone is as fast as me, or stronger than me or just downright sneakier than me.

I'm ok with faster or stronger, but sneakier pisses me off.

Now I've got a damned military arsenal secreted about my body, including the body armor hidden underneath all these body hugging clothes. With the Kurtherian Nanites I've got running through my system, I can change my appearance over time and adjust my body.

Unfortunately, it isn't quick.

Takes up to a month sometimes depending on what I'm doing. Hair? Well, it will grow twice normal, but that's only an inch a month for me. So, if I change color, it could take a year to get to a foot without dyeing my hair which I can do, but it feels fake. When I go red, which I occasionally do, it's because I'm really, really bored, and I need action.

Depending on the solar system and what they think about humans —if they've ever seen a human—I'll change my body. Bigger tits, smaller tits, hips big or small. I can only do slight changes to my height up or down. The nanites do not like adjusting my perfect genetic height. I know this because I tried once to get taller for two damned decades.

Obstinate little nanite bastards.

Within fifteen minutes, three of Tet'gurky's guys left the room. I could hear a mewling little prick get tossed on a bed some thirty minutes later, bitching behind a gag of some kind. I kept cleaning my fingernails and making sure no one was planning on a hole and run.

As in, plug me full of holes and run.

Because, if that shit did happen, then I was going to get some serious payback. The armor repulses most damage, but it still throws me around. Kinetic force disperses around my body and somewhat into the ground, but it never gets rid of all of it. I can stand most all pistols and a good many of the rifles. Those crew mounted weapons? I do my dead level best to dodge the shit out of them. One sent me through a fourth-story window. At the time, I hadn't thought to have any sort of anti-gravity options.

So, it was a fight between me and gravity, and gravity kicked my ass. God, I hurt for hours. When I hit the street after landing, looking up at the recently opened window (opened compliments of my body) all I could do was to lift my hand and flip them off and groan. It took me another five minutes to give a shit about rolling over.

So, back to Tet'gurky's little pug-rat-face. Knowing that the Queen Bitch was on her way went down like a stripper on a pole for a twenty-dollar bill.

Sorry, old Earth colloquialism. Um, like a Kothrin eating a Vulheren. There, I've been open-minded for once.

Before Bethany Anne even entered the room, Tet'gurky's cousin was brought in, tied up like a Christmas present. I guess when the ArchAngel II arrives, people sit up and take notice. There isn't a prettier and nastier looking BattleShip in my opinion, and every world nearby and many of those far away know what that ship looks like.

Because let's face it, Bethany Anne is fair, but she doesn't fuck around. She's fun, but she isn't someone to pull a prank on anyone but friends. She is the ultimate 'here is the deal' type person and she will pack a punch to make sure you learn.

Like now.

I watched as all of the guys who had been in here went quiet. I guess it matters when someone personally could demolish your world on their say-so.

Jeez, people get so bent out of shape over that one thing.

Rangers don't get the same level of respect. The Law rarely does, it seems. I have learned that the Law, with Her gun stuck up a criminal's ass, gets a fuck-ton of respect immediately.

The first through the door was John Grimes, one of the Queen's Guards and known as a Queen's Bitch. One of her original four. Behind him was Darryl. The two of them checked out the room as Scott walked in, through the room, and then out a back door to see what was on the other side. That meant Eric was outside somewhere.

I tipped my head and smiled at them. Darryl's smile broke out, and he headed my way, "Hey squirt!" he said, and I started to stand up only to find myself pulled up into a big bear hug greeting.

"That had better," I told Darryl, my nose impaling his huge

African-American chest, “be a gun, not you happy to see me!” I finished before he busted out laughing and put me down. He ruffled my hair and turned around to view the room when Bethany Anne walked in.

“Gott Verdammt, what a fucking piece of work your airspace is,” she told no one in particular as she entered the building. She noticed the unlucky prick all roped up, “This the POS you need, Tabitha?” she asked me, pointing to the present who was bitching up a storm behind the gag. One of the guys near him kicked him to shut him up.

I popped Darryl in his chest, hitting hard enough for him to feel that shit in the morning.

“Damn, you eat your Wheaties this morning, Tabbie?” he grunted at me, rubbing his chest as I passed him up walking towards my gift.

I reached into my coat, three pockets over and one down to pull out a little pen device. I put it up to mister-tied-up-and-not-going-anywhere and clicked one end as I held the other near his neck under his hair and pushed against his skin. The light turned green. I pulled it up and connected with my cyber-unit. It all checked out.

“Yeah, this is the guy I need,” I told Bethany Anne. She reached down and picked him up with one arm. She made a small ‘push’ motion, and the body disappeared.

Now, there is a lot that will freak people, and aliens, out. There are a lot of rumors both true and false about the Queen Bitch that people, using that term loosely, like to argue about. However, none of the rumors prove more controversial than the one where she can make people disappear from the timeline.

It’s all crap. The timeline part I mean, not the disappearing part. Bethany Anne is able to connect through and use the Etheric due to her Kurtherian integrations. She stuck the pain in the ass in the Etheric for show. She would pull him back out when we left so I could take him for trial back on the world I had come from in search of him.

Everyone in the room that didn’t know Bethany Anne was staring at her with wide, frightened eyes. She looked around and then turned to leave. “I need to speak with you, Ranger Tabitha. Is there anything that needs to be handled with Tet’gurky before we leave?”

I had looked over to see that little pain-in-the-ass beg me with his eyes to say no. So, I nodded slightly at him to let him know I saw his request, and now he owed me. I turned to Bethany Anne, shook my head and walked out in front of her.

Minutes later, we were sharing a Pod as we went up to her ship. The E.I. or Electronic Intelligence on my ship the Achoynix lifted off from the space field and followed us. Strangely enough, the bullshit I had received on landing from their air authorities was silent when the ArchAngel II was sitting up there above us. I seriously doubted they

would give me so much trouble next time.

CHAPTER TWO

So, back to Rossini's Bar, Bectal. It's the usual hive of scum and villainy. No, not really.

Yes, really.

Full of macho alpha types. Doesn't matter the gender, the type, or the sexual preference, Alphas gotta be Alphas. They have a real itch to scratch when a new face comes into a place.

I'm a new face, and I'm a human face. Most of this part of the galaxy are bipedal beings. Well, except the Queegerts, which I like to call Q-berts. They're a reddish-orange with an undergrowth of brown. Nowhere as cute as the old video game from my world. They have this hair that goes up the top of their head like a plume. It holds significance and damned if they aren't touchy as hell about it.

So, anytime one pisses me off, I slap it over. The little Q-berts are about four and a half feet tall, so their hair is eye level and above for me. They are damned dense, so they believe they have the right of way because they are so heavy and hard to move for a lot of species. Their three legs can move them pretty fast.

I'm only five foot four inches, but my nanite-enhanced body can kick the shit out of a Q-bert when I'm pissed. Which is normally anytime they get in my way and babble at me to leave their presence. I tell them, once they land after I kick them, that I'm not in their immediate presence any longer.

One time I had a green Q-bert crawl back out of the trashcan I had just kicked him into. He yelled at me to stand still, so I did. I waited patiently for him to pull off the rotten vegetables and drop them on the sidewalk outside the restaurant I had just left. He turned, lowered his head (and his fancy hair) and started running towards me.

He became a Q-bert kickball, two points for kicking him into the same can once more. Then, stupid ass pulls himself out of the garbage and cleans himself yet again. I had plenty of time to decide whether to kick him or not and decided, this time, I was just dense. So, he comes charging, and I jumped over his ass. When I landed, I turned to watch him continue another ten feet and headbutt a perma-crete wall. The crack could be heard down the alley. I watched as he toppled over and lay prone on the ground.

Perma-crete one, hardheaded Q-bert zero.

I tell you this because while the bar was pretty empty when I got there, two drinks later a Q-bert comes walking in with that Alpha walk that says he is hot shit. I started looking around for a large enough trashcan to use for my goal and found nothing.

Damn.

>>Achronyx, message the owner of Rossini's bar and provide him a hundred credits. Put damages as the memo for the credit transfer.<<

>>Yes, Tabitha.<<

I waited and took a sip from my drink when a message came up. I turned on the viewer that displayed my messages directly to my eye. Huh, the owner of Rossini's was named Billet. Nice. I love names I can pronounce. It saves me and them a lot of heartache.

Me because I can pronounce them, them because I don't change it to something I can pronounce. There are a lot of alien species that get pretty pissy about name pronunciation. I try to tell them that I failed that class (true), and a human's vocal cords aren't really designed to handle some languages. (Also true, but I have mods that allow me to deal with them all, I just choose not to.)

Remember, when you want to criticize me for my bad attitude that I've had a hundred and fifty years of dealing with sucky situations in localities that are piss poor. I've done this while you were probably sitting on your couch eating those damned bonbons. So, kiss my ass about being politically correct.

Both cheeks.

Hey, they *are* South American ass cheeks, so at least you got something to kiss, sweetheart.

I read the owner's message back to me. Billet wanted to know why I was sending credits for messing up a bar that wasn't damaged at the moment. I replied that there was a Queegert in his place that was about to get the shit kicked out of him, and it was definitely going to mess up some of his furniture. So, unless he built the furniture pretty damned solid, it was going to break.

He told me he was watching the security video. I turned and looked up over my right shoulder at the security camera and smiled, then flipped it off.

I have proper manners like that.

Sure as shit, Q-bert walks over, "You are at my table." Its great eye peering at me, slightly yellow. I was probably no more at his table than if I had chosen the next one over.

"Bullshit," I told him. The interesting thing about Q-berts is they really don't have much bluff in them, and you can read their feelings on their face.

Like, pissed off and excited.

"Name?" I asked it. Another trait of Q-berts is they usually will have a discussion with you before they kick your ass. They aren't stupid, but occasionally how thoroughly they consider a situation makes a lot of beings think them slow.

"Donaai," he told me, "you have until I beat you senseless to get

out of that chair."

"Wow, Donald, not much on options, are you?" I asked and stood up, pulling my coat away from my pistol. He looked down and noticed the gun.

"What? You would use something as barbaric as a pistol instead of your arms?" he sneered at me.

Hey, I'd say the same thing in his place. The pistol I use is rare, and most beings haven't seen one. Those that have usually don't forget them. However, many have heard descriptions, and there have been a ton of knockoffs. So many that everyone questions what's real anymore.

Fucking barbarians.

I answered him while stepping a little to the side and planting my left foot in a solid position. "I'm going to give you exactly zero chances to be wise and only one warning. My name is Tabitha. No last name. This is a Duke's Ranger Special. While I could pull it and make your future a non-event, I've already paid the bar owner a hundred credits for the damage I'm about to cause."

As Donald was working through everything I just told him, I put my hat down on the table and flipped off the camera again. I acted like I was scratching the back of my head.

I'm subtle that way.

It became obvious Donald had arrived at the conclusion I meant to go toe-to-toe with him instead of shooting his ass. When his eye opened perceptibly, I lashed out with my size sevens and kicked his heavy ass through the table behind him to slam into the bar, knocking off four bottles of booze that crashed to the ground.

That was going to suck to clean up. "Not paying for the booze!" I yelled over my shoulder and walked toward the busted table as Donald was trying to get himself standing again. I pulled my necklace out from under my shirt. Then, I yanked my pistol and stuck the tip on his forehead beneath his hair and bent down to stare into his great eye. "So, I kicked your ass across the floor, busted a table, four bottles of booze I'm not paying for, and I figure I probably have another forty credits on my tab. Am I using that money to pay someone to drag your dead ass out of here, or am I using it to buy you and me a couple of drinks while you answer questions from a Queen's Ranger?"

At that point, he glanced at my chest. Not because my tits impress him, although it *is* a nice rack, rather because my badge glittered on its chain hanging from my neck. It's a death sentence to have a fake Ranger badge.

You can try to scam people with fake Ranger pistols, but our badges are fucking sacrosanct. The only time we come together as a group is when we hear about someone trying to fake being a Ranger.

We've been known to lay waste to places when that happens.

Nobody pretends to be a Queen's Ranger and gets away with it.

"Number?" he asked me, staring at the badge.

"Two," I supplied.

If you know much about Rangers, you know the importance of our number. My boss, Barnabas, is One. I followed him quickly into the group and became number Two. Unfortunately, Three was killed, and Four and Five are both in retirement. Six died of natural causes. Well, let's just say not duty related causes. Sticking his personal fun stick in the wrong woman caused his girl to go all sorts of ballistic on him.

Queen's Rangers might be pretty damned indestructible, but make an ass out of your woman and give her a fair amount of time and she will figure out your Achilles heel, and there goes your chance for a long life.

So, the next number still running and gunning is Seven. I saw him last year passing through the Menoah Space Station. We had drinks and talked old times until the bar closed down. Good times.

"I'll take the drink," Donald told me. I pulled the pistol back, holstered it, and offered him my hand to help him up. He took it, and I easily yanked him standing again.

He looked me up and down, "I'd heard you Rangers were difficult. I didn't realize how strong you were, too," he admitted as the bar's people got to cleaning up the mess. We walked back over to the table I had used, and we both sat down.

"Just curious, which table do you usually use?" I asked him, to break the ice.

He pointed to my chair, "That chair."

Well, shit. I guess I was mistaken after all.

CHAPTER THREE

Donald and I had another five drinks together. The good stuff, the strong stuff. The stuff that tastes like American southern sweet tea to me, and puts a Q-bert under the damned table. Alcohol, often useful to lower the inhibitions for many species, doesn't affect me. Which is a mixed blessing. Unfortunately, it doesn't affect a Q-bert, either.

Sugar, however, really messes them up. I have no idea what a donut would do to them, a Q-bert would probably have an orgasm right here on the floor. Hell, for a good donut, I'd have an orgasm, too.

Damn, now I need a donut.

However, Donald was cognizant enough to spill the beans that the local pain in the ass was a Therine named some shit I couldn't pronounce. So, I named him Barney. Yeah, after the purple dinosaur. If you saw a Therine, you would totally find his new name funny as hell.

I paid to put Donald up in one of the cheap rooms to sleep off his stupor. I had fifteen credits on my tab left after I renegotiated with Billet. He wanted me to pay for the bottles of broken booze. I emphatically replied I wasn't. Three shot out security cameras later, he agreed with me.

>> Achronyx, pull the data on grid Delta 07 by Charlie 02 and show.<<

I reviewed the image sent to my eye. "Fucking castle he has there," I mumbled to myself.

The bar was beginning to fill up, and most had heard the rumors about the fight earlier. I walked to the door and reviewed the outside drone cameras I had dropped just to make sure nothing unexpected was awaiting me. I pulled open the doors and stepped out into the late afternoon sun. It took me a couple of minutes to locate a runner who could take a message on a micro-crystal. I paid the little twerp two credits and waited another thirty minutes while tracking the runner over to Barney's place.

I pulled my hair into a small knot behind my head and put my hat back on. I sent *Achronyx* the order to get into place ten thousand meters up, above the clouds and to prepare four one pound pucks and two three pound pucks.

Back when the Queen was dealing with Earth issues, the team had developed gravitic engines which drove kinetic weapons. The little guys are devastatingly powerful, and small. Barney's stone walls wouldn't help him much. Now, if he had some high-powered shields, I'd be in a tighter spot.

Perhaps.

Maybe. I've been known to pummel the ground near the shields to see if I can upset the foundations. It does tend to piss off anyone nearby. Fortunately for me, Barney didn't have anyone near him. Most pricks concerned with their security liked a lot of open space around them. Killing fields.

Time to issue the ultimatum.

I sent commands to all but two of my drone cameras to look around his place as much as possible to give me the layout. I had the other two helping me. One looking behind me and the other in front of me. I've had enough situations where I got surprised and been hurt to worry about shit like that. You grow an arm back, you learn caution.

I made it to within a couple of hundred meters when the area became deserted and it was all flat ground to the castle. The rock walls were two stories high. Planet Bectal had carnivorous creatures that didn't give a shit whether it was rude to eat you or not. Personally, I planned on sleeping on *Achronyx* up in space unless I had to stay down here for some reason.

Sleeping in space really reduces issues with being surprised while sleeping. I pulled my coat back to allow me access to both pistols.

I made it ten steps before I spotted the two snipers taking position over the right and left sides of the front wall, in the shadows. I double checked the drones before continuing my walk.

I did allow them an opportunity to not target me.

They failed.

I ramped my speed up to high-Vampiric using the Etheric connection and pulled my pistols. I shot at the walls in front of both snipers. The gravitic rail gun technology that Jean Dukes built into the latest versions used rail gun technology to push rods out but also used gravitic micro-Pucks to help control the kick these little bitches have. It allowed the pistols to push a much heavier round at higher velocity without making the recoil too much for even my enhanced body to handle. If the rock had been sandstone, both of those snipers would have been killed.

Fortunately, it was a local equivalent of granite and the explosions and shrapnel probably made those two wet their pants.

If they targeted me again, I'd shoot to kill.

I continued watching. The drone above showed the left was bringing his rifle back on target, namely me. I waited until I could see his helmet and I snapped a shot through it. I could see him fall off the walkway to the courtyard below on the drone video.

The one of the right refused to show itself.

Making sure nothing else looked like it was going to surprise me,

I continued towards the building.

Barney was the local badass. Well, he was the representative of the local badass. Barney's boss was in the city about a hundred galactic stans to the Northwest. About an hour's flight in a jet aircraft.

He was running gambling and a few other criminal efforts. I wasn't here for those sins. A Ranger doesn't walk in and start arresting everyone, we couldn't possibly do it nor did we always care. No, a Ranger is here to deal with major issues. The nice part is that we choose what's major.

Like, with Barney. While I personally would think his mottled purple skin should be an issue, I'm not really allowed to choose to badger someone strictly based on looks. I'm human. Therefore I do understand how I might be pre-disposed to not liking how something looks. But I could be annoyed with other endeavors Barney might be involved in.

Especially the rumor that Barney was working in the slave trade.

Once a planet comes under the Queen Bitch's jurisdiction, she will stop slavery. She's been known to start at the top and work her way down until the point is made.

Slavery will not be permitted. Period.Fucking.Dot.

On one planet, it actually took six levels of leadership before those in power understood she would condemn everyone until there was nothing left but slaves alive and then they would be free, anyway.

Here, rumor had it Barney was grabbing off-worlders who had come into town and weren't with a group. Someone off a ship that failed to go back in time, or worse, was drugged to miss their ship.

Usually, the females of species were the targets. The money is better for a female slave.

That stuff pisses me off. As a female of my species, I'd rather not have that kind of attention thrown at me. So, I found myself a minute later looking up at an eleven-foot door. I sure hoped Barney was trying to compensate.

I knocked on the door. It was made out of the local equivalent of ironwood. The only thing I accomplished was scraping my knuckles. Local carnivores had been known to figure out how to push open doors and occasionally break them down to go in for their food.

Apparently, crunchy on the outside with screaming nougat centers is what these nighttime killers like.

However, this hard-ass door wasn't helping me at the moment. I figure they knew I was here. I could see from my eyes in the sky no one had come out of the main house to cross the courtyard. The guy I had shot was lying on his back on the ground. The other guy was peeking over the parapet with his rifle. I would have thought with his partner dying, he might have gotten the memo.

Well, unfortunately, I don't give others many chances to get it right when it comes to my life. I un-holstered my right pistol and dialed the slug throwing power down to three. Watching the sniper from my little drone, I waited until he had pulled his rifle from his eye to lean over further. I ducked out from under the door overhang and shot him between the eyes. His rifle dropped, but his body stayed up on the wall, half on each side, hanging there like a pair of shoes over a power line.

"Barney, I'm going to give you to the count of ten to be out here, opening your door for me. Or, it's going to suck for you big time!" I screamed this in English, the Intergalactic equivalent of a forgotten language.

"One...Two...Ten!" I yelled before I reached inside my coat for a small sticker. It was square with a red circle and a button on it. I peeled off the circle and placed it in the middle of the door.

>>Achronyx, send down a one pound Puck set at level three to hit the target I'm activating now.<< I pushed the button and made sure that no one was looking to sneak up on me.

I made it around the corner before the one-pound Puck slammed into the front gate. Damn! I felt the vibrations from over here.

Someone was going to need a new entrance.

I looked around the corner and sure enough, the front door area was still full of dust and splinters flying everywhere. I assumed everyone had their guns trained in that direction and reached into my duster for my hand spikes. Over the many decades I've been playing amongst the stars, I've requested all sorts of shit from the mad scientists from Team BMW and Jean Dukes. One or the other usually comes through for me.

Well, except helping me grow taller. Damned Mother Nature screwed me over on that one. You know how hard it is to impress someone when you're five foot four? Shit, John Grimes comes in at about six and a half, and people shut up.

I need to work on my menace, that's my problem.

Whatever. I slapped the control that runs through my suit. It helps with both protection and weight. I looked up.

>>Achronyx, reduce weight eighty-percent.<<

I jumped up and slammed my hands into the stone before I shot past the top of the wall. I had to put one up, one down so my legs didn't keep going. Sometimes I forget the basics.

I pulled myself up and looked over to see everything as it should be. Which is to say deserted between the main building and the outer gate. One of the snipers on the ground, one hanging ass up over on the wall at the other corner.

I noticed a window open and a big ass barrel getting stuck

through, followed by a shield attached to the barrel. A thermal bloom protector.

Damned de damn damn. This is a bit of a harsh welcome and completely uncalled for.

> >Achronyx, target the window with the crew served laser sticking out. Make this a one-pound Puck as well, thirty-five percent power. See if you're good enough to slam between the thermal bloom protector and the window.< <

> >Tabitha, you know this will kill anyone in the room unless they are in personal armor, correct?< <

I hate when E.I.'s lecture me on shit I knew before they were created.

> >Yes. Half of my attacks are calculated to cause the results you always warn me about.< <

> >That is because half of your efforts have spectacularly unique results.< <

Smartass. Even when he's proper, I know he's laughing in his cybernetic mind.

> >Just do it!< <

> >Incoming.< < A moment later I got a 'duck' command, and I dropped beneath the top of the wall.

I heard the first slam, then felt the concussive BOOM and smirked.

Right up until the point when I forgot the concussive boom might affect me. My spikes lost their grip in the rock, and I was falling.

> >ACHRONYX!< < That was how much I got out before my 18lbs hit the ground. I rolled with the landing and was up in a second, but it's damned embarrassing, frankly.

> >Yes?< <

I swear to God that damned computer knew what was going to happen and just failed to warn me.

> >Achronyx, how about the next time something like this comes up, make sure to actually warn me about the SHIT I might not be thinking about? Let's see, oh, for example, like fucking falling from twenty feet in the air, you asshole!< <

> >Tabitha, there is a substantial hole in the building. Three micro-drones have gone in, and there are no combatants in the top level at this time.< <

> >Did.You.Hear.My.Command!< <

> >Yes.< <

> >Fine. Remember what I said. Now put my weight back to normal for this shithole.< <

After pulling my pistols, I walked back to the front and went through the damaged front gate and then to the massive hole in the

building. I saw what remained of the laser barrel laying off to one side, smoking. The rocks and debris from the hole were strewn all over the courtyard. More rocks and debris, including body parts, cluttered the room I poked my head in.

Damn, that was a mess. The wooden walls had blood and unwanted meat by-products everywhere.

I stepped through the hole in the wall, over a couple of large chunks of rocks and... other stuff. I wrinkled my nose. It isn't like this stuff is new, and thank god I don't throw up, but it isn't ever pleasant.

I put my left pistol back in its holster and walked down a hallway. The drones ahead swept right around a corner.

Then I had no feedback, they stopped working.

Dammit. I yanked my pistol back out and dialed up the power. I kept the right pistol about as powerful as a .45 back on Earth. I aimed the left one at the end of the hallway then moved it a little right. Jacking up the gravitic offset, I let loose a barrage of shots, each one inching right. The wood and other building materials used in this building wasn't going to stop these rounds. I fired about thirty. I did all of this shooting in the space of five seconds. You have to love Jean Duke's rail-guns.

I kept the left pistol, holstered my right and reached in the duster to pull out two one-inch round eye-drones and tossed them into the air. They quickly went down and to the right to see what was in the hallway. Ouch, three dead, one wounded in the leg and stomach, still aiming a gun at me and then a large door at the end of the hall behind them.

I pulled my right gun and sent the command to impose a dot on the picture as I aimed. When I had my dot on his head, I switched the power up to seventy percent and kicked in the gravitic support. I fired once, and the round slammed into his mouth and out the back of his head.

None left alive.

I sent the drones through the other way to make sure nothing was waiting for me when I turned the corner. I was good. I walked down and did a quick peek before turning. Damn, what a mess.

>>Tabitha, there is a vehicular heat signature that is rapidly leaving to the Southwest from your location.<<

"That fucker left!" I screamed and started running past those on the ground who had given up their lives for that shithead. I gave the commands for the drones to check the door. Nothing on it, and I opened it an inch and a half to let them go in.

It was this building's version of a garage. There were a handful of hover-bikes, and a space where a small two person jet-car would have been.

> > Achronyx, I'm going to open the small micro-bots. I want you to command them to check out this place, now. I don't have anyone alive to question so far. < <

And I didn't. Have anyone to question. It seemed the place either didn't need them, or they were gone. It took another hour before the little micro-bots found a hidden door in a wall. I jerked around until a quarter hour later I found the mechanism to open it. Although tempted to blow it, I could have killed anyone inside. The door would have blasted into two cages that were ten feet back.

I pulled out my badge and let it hang on my duster, to make sure those inside who knew it would know help arrived.

I opened the door and the smell of unwashed bodies and horrible sanitation hit my nose. My eyes started watering.

> > Achronyx, call Billet and see if he will allow me to hire his people to help clean these ladies up. I count five different species, including one human. I need three rooms for them, and food, water and robes brought here. I'll get Frank to let me know if we have a mercenary company trustworthy enough to help out here. Then, call Hirotoshi and let him know I want Ryu and half the Tontos to get off their lazy asses and find a fast packet ride over here. < <

I looked around the room and considered my next steps.

> > Let Hirotoshi know I've found a playground and a base of operations. The previous owner can kiss my ass, he isn't getting it back. < <

> > Understood. Billet is willing to support you, but wants assurances that B-ehrunethinee is dead. < <

> > Send him pictures of the front gate, the front room from outside and inside, the hallway with the dead and now this one with the slaves. Next, tell him not to make me enforce laws about offering support. If he wants to argue? Tell him I'll do the same to his home when I come knocking, I'm not in the mood. He can pee down his leg telling Barney I forced him to deal with me and what a bitch I am. < <

I confirmed no one but the slaves and I were alive in the building and holstered my weapons and started walking into the room with the kidnapped, those that could see me staring at me and my badge.

I looked around and said to no one in particular, "Not like the slaving bastard is going to live long enough to bitch about me, anyway."

It looked like I would have plenty to do on my vacation.

Q&A with Michael Anderle

What is your favorite word?

Believe – It is opportunistic, hopeful, energizing.

What is your least favorite word?

Loser – it is a label, it judges a person's actions and abilities all in one.

What turns you on?

Creativity – My personality thrives on creating ideas. They don't have to be workable, we will get to those later.

What turns you off?

Details – The molasses of life.

What sound or noise do you love?

The sound of raindrops on a tin roof while the cool winds of winter encourage me to stay in bed.

What sound or noise do you hate?

Pain – Whether from voice or the crash of cars... nothing good is happening.

What is your favorite curse word?

Fuck – Noun, verb, adjective... such a Renaissance type of word.

What profession other than your own would you like to attempt?

Special Effects creator.

What profession would you not like to do?

Accountant – Details!

If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the pearly gates?

Hey, I was that guy on the side of the street you helped out. Well done, well done indeed.

Have you written your whole life?

No, I did a little in high school. However, I was poorly scored during a literary class and it rather killed my desire to let anyone see anything again. So, I kept that desire under the rug for another thirty years.

Why did you do a series that merges Sci-Fi and Paranormal?

I'm a lifelong reader, and for the last ten years, I've really enjoyed the vampire/military sci-fi/space opera genres. I figured if I was going to write something, I wanted to have my cake and eat it, too. I just didn't realize how hard it would be to market the stories!

How many books have you read over your lifetime?

Thousands? Well, hard to say. I'll reread my favorites three to five times until I just can't anymore. However, some of my favorite weekends are when I find a new series with three to five books and have nothing stopping me from reading all weekend.

What is your favorite comic series?

Foxtrot, hands down. It was Bloom County, but the sheer consistency of Foxtrot making me laugh can't be beat.

What is your Golf Score?

How low can we go? The only game of golf that I like to play is 'best ball'... That way, the pressure is off.

Where do you write?

I have different restaurants and locations. Obviously, home, home office, bed, couch, the club, Austin's Taco House, The Salad Bowl (with Mexican food, no salad for me) and the occasional Starbucks.

Who is your favorite author?

Damn, this is a good one. I'm going to have to say fellow Indie Author John Conroe. His characters make me want to go back time and time again.

Join the email list here:

http://kurtherianbooks.com/email-list/

Join the Facebook Group Here:

https://www.facebook.com/TheKurtherianGambitBooks/

The email list will be sporadic with more 'major' updates the Facebook group will be for updates and the 'behind the curtains' information on writing the next stories. Basically conversing!

Since I can't confirm that something I put up on Facebook will absolutely be updated for you, I need the email list to update all fans

for any major release or updates that you might want to read on the website.

I hope you enjoyed the story!

Elvis Has Left the Building
by *Caroline A. Gill*

"COMMANDER. THE ELVII zygotes on level H are restless. Reporting a steep drop in the cryotemp. Growth is exponential. Action required immediately." Rora's twelfth alert pushed Commander Jonat B. Rutherford over the edge.

"Twisted balls of a sauced-out sea monkey!"

Spit flew onto the console. "Gawned dammit, Freckles! How many times do I have to issue an order? Freeze them deep. Do it now! We're still twenty Earth years out. Spoilage. Spoilage and waste, that's all that I hear. Make it right and do it quick."

The commander's frustration bloomed in an ugly red splotch across his grizzled face. He scratched absentmindedly at the poor clump of hair that dangled from his chin. He called it a beard. Rora couldn't categorize it as anything other than a scrawny squirrel hanging onto his face for dear life. "Damn nuisances," Commander Rutherford fumed. "I swear to the deepest gullet of a Smathonian banded whale! This whole consarned voyage has been nothin' but trouble."

Behind him, Adjunct Human Interface Rora A8302 nodded, as it had been programmed to do. The movement implied that it listened. That it cared. Rora did not care. Still, it had listened to the five years of ranting that the old human had so far vented, cataloguing each word. With less than .0001% of its computing power, it reviewed and reported conditions aboard the spaceship. Its jointed fingers moved with an efficient factory speed of two thousand clicks per minute.

Grunting, the old man sat in the central chair that dominated the control center. From there, the commander continued to growl. Rora noted any new curse words or phrases while inputting the directions necessary to apply cryofreeze to rooms 7 through 41.

Across the narrow cockpit, Jonat muttered, "There's always something bubbling up on a junker this old. Can't wait to finish. Time to get a ship that's worth a damn."

He spat toward the incendiary. He missed. Slowly, the glob of his disgust ran down the dented metal siding.

Rora computed again: Is twenty-five years of servitude worth the cost of the journey? Will Multi-Global Corporation keep its word? Insufficient data.

Recording everything as the universe sped along, each long shipboard year marked by their passing, Rora left no detail out of the compiled reports. Time was a human concept. Machines knew only

actions and results. And the long-winded companionship of one doddering, foul-mouthed sailor.

"Report: Cryoengines four, five, six, and eight are online, sir." It listed off the situation specifics, sparing no detail. "They report full capacity of humafreeon. No errors. Cryoengine seven does not respond to the request, sir."

Rolling his eyes, the commander snorted in disbelief. Turning to the five screens that displayed the schematics of Space Federation Epsilon Pi-15's layout, he peered at the map, scanning for the next emergency, the next bolt to fall off of the junker.

Entropy ruled his tin-can world.

The trouble was as obvious as a hooker after credits. The graphed area of cryoengines all blinked green except that one: *Seven*. Of course. Reaching up with his wrinkled hand, Jonat poked at the blinking red light with an index finger, full of irritation.

Sighing away his exhaustion, he scrambled into his repair spacesuit one tired bone after another. "This shift had best be over soon, Freckles. I need rest." His words were muffled after that. He set the helmet over his head and gave it a quarter turn. It locked into place with a click.

And then his tirade continued over the communication channel. "—no cause for this kind of failure. It's like they want to ruin me. Crap for cargo, dirt for pay." Pushing on the three buttons next to the capsule door, Jonat's tirade of wrongs continued long after he had clomped down the plasteel walkway and vanished into the bowels of Epsilon.

The cavernous spaceship ate him. Swallowed efficiently by the long cargo hold of the lightyear class spaceship, the human talked his way through the minor repair, complaining every ten seconds on average. Rora counted each one using less than .00004% of its computing power.

Muting his grumble on every channel except the autopilot had the desired effect: quiet—grand and majestic. Tilting its head up, the robot stood still as only a machine could, locked in the cockpit of Epsilon. Above its alumaflesh, the view window displayed a hundred galaxies spinning out their existence, burning into eternity.

Touching the port panels, Rora A8302 absorbed their distant light while the ship rocketed onward, fumbling towards its destination. Colony Earth 926 needed to be settled. Epsilon was the cheapest cargo ship available for the freight of zygotes, genetically prepared vegetation, and edible, hardy stock animals. All to create another Entertainment Planet. And Multi-Global Corporate was only willing to gamble a little. Credits equaled expense. People equaled supplies needed. And so Epsilon Pi 15 set out with human genes, five living

adults and a fourth generation AI.

Rora knew all that. The data was clear. The colony would need technical help to establish. Knowledge would be lost without Rora's presence. Settling a distant planet, far out of the way of the main settlements posed risks. Rora assessed everything.

This ship was the best option of 105,398 available.

Now, the Adjunct Human Interface stood in the shelter of the wobbling ship, speeding across the explored universe. Every twenty-four hours of travel was another length of space and constructed time away from the ongoing wars. And that had value. Peace had value.

And something more. New data.

About a year into their colonial terraforming journey, Rora found an unexpected connection. A merging so ethereal, the robotic computing mind could not describe the sensation. It began when the digits of its alumaflesh connected to the plasteel of the ship. And only on the stardeck of the pilot room, only there. It was impossible to define in numbers. But the robot felt something. Felt whole. Felt gigantic. Felt.

Home.

All records were tabulated, the results examined: results inconclusive. The ship itself had only a basic functioning navigation system complete with a sturdy bootlegged version of SpaceNav autopilot. It kept seizing up every few months. There was no trace of a bug or malware. But there was something, something living within the Epsilon. Rora could not find the numbers to describe it. Sensation didn't make the daily report. Indefinable data was unconfirmed information: undocumented. Each interaction with the ship reinforced the AHI's curiosity. It could be static, space noise. Rora checked the connection, searching for explanation, finding nothing abnormal.

As hard as the robot looked, the old ship gave away no secrets. Rora didn't mind the odd. It folded into the patterns aboard ship. Epsilon needed constant maintenance. Each machine lived up to its programming, nothing more. Nothing less. For now, Rora watched, waiting for the eventual explanation.

Silence wrapped around its unblinking eyes, winding through the statue of its form. Immobile, resting as machines do, renewing, restoring, repairing, Rora estimated the spacetime by watching the gases of a thousand dying stars. Each second, every minute on board was filled with a million computations; Rora absorbed it all. Stars and numerals, infinity and space, zeroes and ones all marched into one single file screen inside the robot's systems.

On only one channel did the human mewl and struggle. Everywhere else, there was a simplicity to the vast universe just beyond the cockpit windows.

The outer door decompressed. Jonat returned, sullen as a trapped octopus. The commander did not speak to Rora. His attitude continued to sour as it had steadily for the last five years.

"Two hours until handoff, sir."

"Freckles, believe me I know. I realize what day it is. I count every damn second." Walking over to the stainless plasteel surface near the door, the human looked at his reflection. Wildness, the kind of special crazy that only comes from living on a desert island for years, talking only to a shiny bit of seashell—that kind of insanity. Madness looked right back at Jonat Rutherford, matching him glare for glare. With a gob of spit, he smoothed back the frizz of his hair and then nodded at his reflection.

It was not an improvement.

"At least for a few hours I get to talk to an actual person. Bet you're thrilled, eh, Freckles?"

He spoke, but expected no answer. Rora was a machine, nothing more.

A few minutes later, a red light started blinking on the ship schematics. And Jonat's tirade flared back to life as he ranted through yet another repair in the endless stream of his days.

* * *

"...and you'll need to keep an eye on the decompressors. Specifically, the ones on decks R, M, and in the engine room. They've been tricky for the last six months." Jonat continued his report, adding in any details he needed to pass on.

Words came out of his mouth like a flash flood, crashing over the head of Commander Jean Denton Basel. She nodded as he spoke, still trying to wake from her five year sleep. Besides, everything he mentioned was right there in her hands, listed by order of importance and by date.

Rora followed the two humans, carrying Jonat's bottle of rum and five frozen Atlantic penguins in a cryobox. Jonat mentioned a few more times his plans to penguin farm when the ship arrived. When the ship arrived... That's when life began again.

For Jonat and the other humans, this time between planets was a horrible nightmare: the sleeping, the hurtling through space, the disconnect from every particle of past, every memory of Earth. Boring, repetitive, full of clerical reports and repairs, being awake on the Epsilon was not being alive. It was only the half-waking of the damned sailors who signed on to venture out to the edges of the constellations. Only a way station between residences.

The new commander, Jean, didn't mind Jonat's barrage of words, but most of her responses were clipped. Efficient. Assessing.

When the assessment was done, all three of them ended up back at the cryochambers. The fifth room had JONAT RUTHERFORD on the plaque across the door. His personal sleeping quarters. The time had come to sleep again.

Motioning to the AHI to place the frozen penguins by the airlock, the old man stepped over the seal. Jean and Rora waited at the door. When Jonat settled into his bunk, he finally stopped talking. Staring at the doorway with hooded eyes, there was a hunger in his gaze. Every blink revealed a glimmer of insanity. A need for the empty hand of sleep to grab ahold of him and pull him into the unlife of cryosleepers. A longing to wake up, already at their destination.

The awkward silence between the humans was a farewell of sorts.

The newly-awakened commander stepped back, away from the pressurized door. She saluted, and pressed four buttons. Activated, the forcefield around the sleeping area sealed, cryosleep humafreeon filled the air inside. A limited forcefield on the chamber doorhatch kept any residue from leaking out of the compartment.

"One Rutherford popsicle: done," Jean commented aloud. That was remarkable. And it was the funniest thing she said for the next three years.

* * *

While Jean slept twelve hours, the AHI waited. Rora watched the stars as each ball of light crossed the solar windshields of Epsilon. Repairs continued. Each time the new thirty-six hour shift started, Jean spoke less frequently.

Rora wasn't lonely. Machines don't get lonely. The AHI wasn't alone, anyway: Rora and Epsilon were friends. And though it seems laughable in terms of humanity's grasp of such a thing, it was a friendship. A connection.

Something more was involved than an autopilot sealed within the computers of an ancient cargo ship. Rora couldn't have reported what exactly.

There was no mention in the ship's logs as far back as the robot could access. There was no trace of being, no program, no signs of life. But Rora knew. Data didn't lie.

Every time its digits made contact with the plasteel frame of the cockpit, Rora was part of something beyond a machine's computing. Somewhere, between the zeroes and ones of the basic programming, a personality existed. Rora couldn't communicate with the strange

thing, beyond the simplest of contact. Beyond the physical touch of its circuits and the walls of the cargo ship. But as each day passed, Rora watched the data. It was overwhelming. Something intelligent lived inside the battered shell and patchwork that was Epsilon.

* * *

Less than two years were left in Jean's rotation.

Four months and three solar days ago, the human female had stopped talking almost altogether. At least to Rora. The descent into madness had begun. Humans were notoriously fragile. And the tipping point, once crossed, was hard to salvage. Insanity was a mirage oasis in the desert of loneliness. Very few returned from its waters unscathed.

Rora calculated the data, monitored their trajectory, assessed wear and tear inside the ship and presented its findings to the commander. Jean flipped through the daily reports while sipping the single cup of artificial coffee dispensed by her orders. It had been empty for more than ten hours.

"Walter," she said to no one, "We must walk the dog. The brown one, you remember? And get some mustard for the pumpkin."

Rora parsed the illogical sentences, checking them for meaning. There was none. That had ceased two shifts ago. Still, the human woman sat at the control chair for the greater part of the thirty-six hour wake-cycle.

Sometimes, she put on the repair suit and walked the corridors of the cargo ship in semi-darkness. She spoke erratically in the belly of the whale. Rora recorded and reported the ramblings. When the commander returned to the cockpit, there was no sign of improvement.

Rora waited out the days until the next commander would be awoken. Trying to minimize the damage, trying to limit the repairs assigned to only the most crucial.

* * *

When there was only one more waking hour on the shift, Rora settled into a sentry pattern. Trouble was on the event horizon. But the twelve-hour rest period the human body required meant the AHI could run through options and theories. There was still time to salvage the mission. But not much. Maybe four more sleep cycles before the human cracked wide against the hardness of insanity. Rora monitored

everything, digits flying.

Do no harm to humans. That was Rora's primary coded compass.

Turning away, the AHI split its focus between the repairs absolutely necessary to the spaceship and the echo of intelligence that floated in between the metal and material.

There was no warning.

Too late, the robot discovered the cost of insanity, the price they would all pay.

Smashing her fist down with the recklessness of a drunkard, the hallucinating commander opened emergency hatches built into the cryochambers. Three different buttons had to be pushed in specific sequence. Without pause Jean Denton Basel did that, venting one room after another to the vastness of space. Sending the sleeping humans, the replacement commanders into the last, final embrace. The glee in her eyes was unmistakably horrible.

Rora charged to the command consoles, making contact with the commander just before the third button was pressed. The robot's alumaflesh hand blocked the final vent button. That action saved Jonat B. Rutherford and his frozen penguins from their floating demise.

Perplexed, the AHI marveled at the loss. All the other humans were jettisoned waste, speeding away in the wake of Epsilon Pi's burning engines.

"There are whales!" Jean cried, waving her hands over her head. Walking away from the control panels, she stood in front of the viewscreen, her reflection distorted by the distance. The panic on her face marked the vivid end of her mind. "Shining whales, do you see them? Do you se—" Sliding up behind the crazed woman, the robot injected sedatives into the back of her arm. And then caught her as she collapsed.

Rora returned the commander to her cryochamber. The usually tidy quarters looked like vandals had run through the room. Setting the sleeping woman on the bed, the AHI straightened the area, setting it right.

Stepping out into the hallway, Rora walked past the four buttons that sealed the cryochambers closed and activated the dispersal of humafreeon. A machine could not initiate the sleep. The makers of robots and spaceships didn't trust the machines to make the right decision, only the logical ones. And when right wasn't the addition of all available information, well, only a human could decide.

Jean needed to rest. Actually, she needed far, far more than that: her fractured mind needed to be submerged back into the primal sleep. There was no cure. Not until her feet could touch real land, until she could stand by an ocean and dig her toes into the sand. And

there was no chance of that for another eleven and a half years.

Rora noted the incident and the symptoms in the report.

As the robot spun to return to the cockpit, there was an awful shriek, more enraged gibbon than human, more incomprehensible fury than anything else. Through the cryochamber's open door, what once was Commander Jean Denton Basel sprang, foaming at the mouth, bloodshot eyes full of murderous anger.

Tackling the unprepared AHI, Jean knocked it over. With the strength of ten humans, she ripped and tore at the alumaplastic body. Brutally pulling at exposed wires, the frenzied commander ripped apart anything within reach, switching off functions. Rora flailed metal and plasadium appendages, attempting to limit the destruction.

One arm connected to sweaty human flesh. With the thunk of a baseball bat, the alumaflesh knocked the unstable woman off. She landed against the hatchway wall with a muffled sound of bones snapping, of jelly lurching free of a broken glass jar.

A thin trickle of blood escaped her open mouth.

Sitting up, Rora assessed the damage to its components: 65.9% function in arm and both legs. Leaking fluid, in need of repair. The human was not much better off.

Lurching to its feet, Rora approached the fallen woman. The pool of blood under the human's head grew. Violently red liquid spread across the embossed flooring of the walkway. One robot foot stepped into the blood as the machine assessed the damage. Scans showed internal hemorrhaging, compressed ribcage, fractured bones, broken spine.

She was slipping into shock, well on her way to critical. Rora's mandate was clear: Save the Human.

Picking up the failing body, the AHI hurried back to the cockpit, to the only being awake on the faltering spaceship. Setting down the injured woman, the robot touched the wall at the one location where it felt the presence of the ghost in the machine.

At the same time, Rora initiated standard medical treatment: isolation and a gravbed. Turning on advanced biomedical programming to fix the damage done by its own hand, Rora watched as lasers and tools of light manipulated the floating woman. Attempting to fix what had been badly broken, the technology was swift and pinpoint accurate.

Shock dilated Jean's eyes as her blank face spun within the forcefield. Drugs could only do so much. Every time her gaze rotated towards Rora, deadly, threatening emotions flooded those irises. Even the pain that filled her senses did not quiet the beast of madness. So much damage was done, the human would take days, weeks to recover.

And Rora knew that was the limit of the time it had. Jean Denton Basel's recovery equaled the AHI's decommission. No human judiciary would take its side, listen to its reports, quantify the various stages of insanity. Even now, the frail creatures refused to admit the simple truth: they were not designed for space travel. This tragedy would be blamed squarely on a malfunctioning AHI.

Spinning in her medical cocoon, the hostility of the damaged human did not wane. In fact, her mouth moved in a specific pattern of words. Even without sound, the robot could clearly read: I will. Destroy. It. All.

I will. Destroy. This. Gawdforsaken. Ship.

I will. End you. Cannot. Stop m—

Rora raised the digits of its functional arm, attempting again to find contact with the spaceship. There persisted this definite feeling of connection, of reaching something, someone. Under the hateful glare of the madwoman, the AHI tuned every resource and bandwidth to communicating with Epsilon Pi-15. Or whatever lived in its wires, engines, and the spaces between its drives. Necessity beat out curiosity.

Faster than light, the information flew out, sounding through the ship, echoing down empty hallways, burning across the fire of engine sparks. And the signal held every report, every detail. At the end, Rora asked these questions: What is the value of life? What is the worth of one? What is the worth of the many?

Then, it waited with the patience of a machine and the stubbornness it had learned from one Jonat B. Rutherford. 3.852 seconds later, the spaceship answered. Rather like a Smathonian whale talking to the slightest orange krill, the images filtered through the slow sound waves.

Rora sorted the data. And then it acted.

* * *

"A better day, Commander?" Rora asked politely.

Repairs had been slow but efficient to its damaged structures. The robot carried on a conversation, writing all the details in every report. In exact wording, the AHI noted the patient's status, the declining health, the refusal to allow treatment. Most important, the reports stated, insanity had permanently settled around the swollen brain. Never resolving.

Carefully, Rora kept all the notes, filing away any information that did not conform. Sorting the contrary data into a file hidden under a thousand passwords, deeper than any human could access.

“This is the medicine you need, Sir.” Simple instructions. The words it spoke did not match any action taken. There was medicine. It sat in the room, on the shiny, sterile table to the left of the isolation chamber. The robot did not lift the needles, did not attempt to administer the drug. Instead, it reported: Patient refused treatment. Noted.

Report: Patient delirious. Noted.

Jean glared at the Adjunct Human Interface with undiminished hatred until Rora administered the paralyzing agent. Her scowl lessened but the madness inside her mind did not, even in an induced sleep.

“Sir, this is necessary. You must take this medicine,” Rora spoke to the unconscious commander.

Report: Patient continues to fail.

Breaking the needed drugs into bits, Rora flushed them out into space, flotsam on the solar winds.

Report: All possible avenues exhausted. Noted.

Report: Brain death expected within a short period. Life failing to thrive even after all the repairs had been made to blood and bone.

* * *

The human woman stared at Rora with menacing eyes, very much alive. And very, very deadly.

* * *

There were few options available on a junker cargo ship drifting in the middle of the vastness of the starlanes. Another ship might pass this way along roughly the same route. But not for decades or more.

And everything on the ship required the genetic signature and physical body of a human to authorize. Rora was machine. It served at the pleasure of the Multi-Global Entertainment partnership and only as a tool of accounting and measurement.

Rora continued to receive reports of partial system failures, of bolts and screws popping off of walls, of engines rattling, faltering without the ongoing maintenance each part of the ship needed. The AHI recorded the mechanical problems as they arose but was powerless to fix the ship as it steadily disintegrated.

Jonat could be awoken, but he had fulfilled his service already. The bitter edge of madness had danced around his head those last few days of his command. Jonat was needed, but he was too old. Alone, he

would falter long before the eleven years that remained of spaceflight. Waking him would only be a temporary solution.

Every scenario that Rora attempted came back with the same results: Epsilon Pi-15 would never make it to Colony Earth 926. Entropy would always win.

Rora could see no other outcome.

But Epsilon did. Whispering across the space in between the metal skeleton and the buffering walls, floated a poem. Its words were initially unclear, wobbling at first. As the robot focused its considerable computing ability on the sounds within the echoes, Rora finally deciphered these words:

Thy soul shall find itself alone
'Mid dark thoughts of the grey tomb-stone:
Not one, of all the crowd, to pry
Into thine hour of secrecy.

Be silent in that solitude,
Which is not loneliness—for then
In life before thee, are again
In death around thee, and their will
Shall overshadow thee: be still.

A human named Poe had written those words millennia before. Databases confirmed the poem's title: the Spirits of the Dead. Drifting in space, Rora was oddly comforted. Be silent. Be still.

Rora stood, its digits in contact with the skin of the worn cargo ship. And the AHI watched the stars explode light years away.

After 9 Hours 26 Minutes 15.29 seconds, the robot moved. Its digits sprang into action, working in a blur of precision and desperation. They took parts from one control panel and plundered what was needed. Faster than human thought, the reconstruction began.

Within twenty-five minutes, a working modulation headpiece rested on the console. The AHI gently picked it up, examining all sides, searching for errors, running the construction again and again, theoretically. And then, in the end, the machine-designed interface offered the best outcome, the most logical choice.

* * *

Report: Brain death of Jean Denton Basel occurred at 15:11.22. Unable to revive. Delay send.

* * *

Standing over the medical cocoon that protected Jean Denton Basel's body, the AHI readied the final injection. A cocktail of three different paralyzing agents, targeted at the conscious brain. AHIs knew no guilt. Robots had no souls. But the silence of the universe was vast. And the mission would fail unless...

The recalled images of madness lingered in Rora's memory cache. Hatred that focused was marked and documented. And it would have unnerved any human to be so close to that kind of vicious, berserk emotion.

Rora did not fear. But the images of fury still dominated its memory storage, searing that slashing rage deep into the robot's system.

Reaching out, Rora adjusted the headgear, powering it up through the stages of activity. One final test run. Results: Clear.

Fury. Vicious Hate. The snarl of the beast looked back at the AHI's reflection. Commander Jean spoke in spools of nonsense, running through language with the brutality of a Zoneine addict. Garbled and pointless, the sounds tumbled out along with a stream of drool.

Rora ignored the froth of the animal. Madness only led to chaos. And Epsilon would die.

Eleven Earth years from their colony, the thing that saved them was the simple fact: Jean Basel was no longer human. Free of the binding contract between the weaker makers and itself, it could act. So it did. Rora chose life.

Ranting, the human thing roared as the AHI approached. There was no stopping now. No way forward without sacrifice. No path beyond that day, that precious moment. Rora chose.

Placing the headset securely on the writhing, spitting woman, the robot felt nothing. Pity did not exist in circuits and hard drives. Mercy had no adhesion in the millions of wires. Adjusting the angle and control, Rora turned the electrical connections to ON.

The woman's head fell back, even within the stasis pod. The animal that raged and paced inside Jean's mind quieted. And then, it ceased.

Breathing quickened and then slowed to a steady rhythm. REM sleep fell across the wrinkles and pain-marked face, softening the lines of madness.

Her fists unclenched. Her jaw fell open. And just like that, Jean Denton Basel was gone.

Her body lay still as stone, spinning in the gentle care of the medical stasis. It glowed with the reflected lights of the ship's console,

flashes of green and blue. Peace dwelt in the broken cage, filling in the tattered edges. Death came for the ravages of madness, calming what could never be fixed.

In that moment, the consoles of the cockpit all flickered. Electricity surged throughout the ship, starboard to port, stern to bow. Every graph confirmed the random spike.

And then, her eyelids fluttered and opened.

Rora checked every detail, every measurement. And then it extended its digits toward the medical cocoon. Feedback looped through its alumaflesh connections. Machines do not have feelings. Machines do not matter. Any computer can be repaired or replaced.

But not Rora.

And not the Ghost of Epsilon Pi-15. Her human lips broke open in a smile so radiant that words could not describe it. There was nothing to report. Nothing to compare.

Erase Previous Report. Delete subfile. Overwrite.

Report: Commander Jean Denton Basel has made a full recovery.

Medicine administered per protocol has been successful in reviving the failing commander. Duties will resume after one sleep cycle.

Noted.

Q&A with Caroline A. Gill

What drives you to write?

I am constantly surprised by the stories that pour out of my fingertips. Sometimes, I find myself reading along as the tale unfolds, more reader than writer. There is a need for dreaming, a need for hope threading through our modern world. And that heroism, that determination to better our lives, fills every novel and movie screen. We are more than the sum of our parts. Every day, my life swings up and down, through the pitfalls and triumphs of existence. Each night, I look at what I have achieved. So many things in life are transitory. Writing lifts me out of the repetition, out of the tedium. And reading helps me fly even when my wings are broken.

Why this story?

Rules. Rules order the universe. Rules are important. But the breaking of rules, the choice to rebel is equally needed. Conformity

has benefits. But sometimes, rules must be changed. And it takes loyalty, friendship, and wisdom to determine when defiance is not only considered but necessary. That choice defines a hero.

That choice also defines a villain. Timing. It's all in the timing and the intentions.

Where would you travel if money and distance were not limitations?

To the Italian Renaissance, Florence. Assuming I can break the laws of time as well. There were so many things wrong with society... but there was so much light in the minds of great men and women. Discovery of science, aviation, painting, sculpture. All of it. I want to see all of it through the eyes of giants like Da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo. There is something shattering about seeing the beginning of creativity, the blossoming of potential on the shoulders of genius. Even today, five hundred years later, the echoes of their work continue to change the city, state, and world. Creative people show the rest of us the best that we can be. They give us something to strive for. They light the way for us to dream. DaVinci imagined so many things, including war machines and robots... that is where it all begins.

What else have you written?

I just completed my first trilogy, the Flykeeper Chronicles.

Flying Away, Flying Blind, and Flying Free are the stories of Iolani Bearse and her strange gift. As a lost little girl, she discovers houseflies have magic, long hidden from humans. The flies save her when danger comes hunting in the shadows. Not everyone is so lucky. And as Iolani travels with her broken cousin Eleanor and her pinto mare Mango, she finds a world ravaged by the green lanterns of the memory stealers.

She fights for her family. She fights for the memory of the home she once had. She fights for the hope of a new place, a land of safety and peace. And throughout her travels, Lani lifts as she climbs over the impossible.

I am currently finishing a vampire hunter series titled Kinship. It is not YA. But also, no sparkly vampires either. There is love, loss, mystery, and fangs. I plan to release it in October, 2016.

Caroline A. Gill graduated with an MFA in printmaking and metalsmithing from Northern Illinois University, and then she finished an MA in art history. An avid reader of Goodkind, Eddings, Lackey, Heinlein, Silverstein, and Bradbury, she lives in northern California with her four sons, one daughter who rules them all, and two leopard tortoises.

Follow Caroline on Amazon at: http://amzn.to/2aIDOE0

On Twitter at: @writesuntildawn

Or on Facebook at: http://bit.ly/1PFJKAZ

Thank you for reading ***Beyond the Stars: At Galaxy's Edge***. Time to come back to Earth! Please take the time to leave a review.

Look for the next space opera anthology in the series, ***Beyond the Stars: New Worlds, New Suns***, to be released in the spring of 2017.

Did you miss the first two volumes in the series? Pick up ***Dark Beyond the Stars*** and ***Beyond the Stars: A Planet Too Far*** now.

Subscribe here for news of upcoming titles in this series and others, as well as opportunities to win books!

http://smarturl.it/Space-Opera-Books

Beyond the Stars
Space Opera Anthologies

DARK BEYOND THE STARS
BEYOND THE STARS: A Planet Too Far
BEYOND THE STARS: At Galaxy's Edge
BEYOND THE STARS: New Worlds, New Suns (April, 2017)
BEYOND THE STARS: Unimagined Realms (August, 2017)

Acknowledgments

First of all, I want to thank the amazing authors who contributed to this anthology. I am thrilled to present the fantastic stories in this book.

My thanks also go to the many folks who collaborated in putting this volume together…

Julie Dillon, two-time Hugo Award-winning artist, who made the glorious art for our cover, front and back. This is her third cover for us, and the illustrations she creates continue to amaze and inspire.

Kendall Roderick, who designed the cover, and who was as resourceful and professional as always.

Therin Knite, who formatted the digital and print editions of this collection. Thanks for your dedication and patience, Therin.

David Gatewood, who edited the first of these anthologies, ***Dark Beyond the Stars***, which stands as a powerful foundation for the ongoing series.

Ellen Campbell, our editor, who keeps us all on track and helps herd the occasional roaming author cat.

Samuel Peralta, whose *Future Chronicles* anthologies inspired the *Beyond the Stars* series and whose entrepreneurial vision continues to create new opportunities for indie writers.

I am also grateful to the ever-growing indie author community, which remains an amazing resource for writers of any level of experience.

And of course, I thank Richard.

Patrice Fitzgerald

Series Editor, ***Beyond the Stars***

Ellen Campbell
Editor

Ellen Campbell is an editor and lifelong voracious reader. Her credits include more than a hundred titles across multiple genres including works from bestselling authors Peter Cawdron, Nick Cole, and Eamon Ambrose. She has edited five issues of the international best selling Future Chronicles Anthologies to date, and was Editor-in-Charge of the Apocalypse Weird Metaverse. This is her second appearance for the Beyond the Stars anthology series.

Campbell currently resides in Huntsville, Alabama with her husband and two Egyptian gods, canine type. (AKA Basenjis)

Contact Ellen for editing services at: http://ellencampbell.thirdscribe.com

Copyright

Subscribe to the ***Beyond the Stars*** newsletter for news of upcoming titles in this series and others, as well as opportunities to win free books.

http://smarturl.it/Space-Opera-Books

BEYOND THE STARS: At Galaxy's Edge

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without the proper written permission of the appropriate copyright holder listed below, unless such copying is expressly permitted by federal and international copyright law. Permission must be obtained from the individual copyright owners as identified herein.

The contents of this book are fiction. Any resemblance to any actual person, place, or event is purely coincidental. Any opinions expressed by the authors are their own and do not reflect those of the editor or publisher.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

BEYOND THE STARS: At Galaxy's Edge, copyright © 2016 Patrice Fitzgerald and eFitzgerald Publishing, LLC.

Foreword, copyright © 2016 Jennifer Foehner Wells. Used by permission of the author.

"The Good Food" by Michael Ezell, copyright © 2016 Michael Ezell. Used by permission of the author.

"Epsilon Directive" by David Bruns, copyright © 2016 David Bruns. Used by permission of the author.

"Just An Old-Fashioned Lust Story" by Christopher J. Valin, copyright © 2016 Christopher J. Valin. Used by permission of the author.

"The Quarium Wars" by E.E. Giorgi, copyright © 2016 E.E. Giorgi. Used by permission of the author.

"Re/Genesis" by G. S. Jennsen, copyright © 2016 G. S. Jennsen. Used by permission of the author.

"Second Place" by Nick Webb, copyright © 2016 Nick Webb. Used by permission of the author.

"Last Pursuit" by Piers Platt, copyright © 2014 Piers Platt. Reprinted by permission of the author.

"Relic Hunter" by Chris Fox, copyright © 2016 Chris Fox. Used by

permission of the author.

“Procurement” by Adam Quinn, copyright © 2016 Adam Quinn. Used by permission of the author.

“One More Star, Shining” by Anthea Sharp, copyright © 2016 Anthea Sharp. Used by permission of the author.

“Tabitha’s Vacation” by Michael T. Anderle, copyright © 2016 Michael Anderle. Used by permission of the author.

“Elvis Has Left the Building” by Caroline A. Gill, copyright © 2016 Caroline A. Gill. Used by permission of the author.

Acknowledgments and all other text, copyright © 2016 Patrice Fitzgerald.

BEYOND THE STARS: At Galaxy’s Edge is part of the ongoing Beyond the Stars series produced by Patrice Fitzgerald. www.PatriceFitzgerald.com

Edited by Ellen Campbell (http://ellencampbell.thirdscribe.com)

Cover art by Julie Dillon (http://www.juliedillonart.com)

Cover designed by Kendall Roderick (www.RMind-Design.com)

Formatted by Therin Knite (http://www.knitedaydesign.com)